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WELCOME

Sometimes it's good to go with the flow, other times it's best to stand out from the crowd, like this month's cover star TV does. Sharp's Quattron LC-46LE821E ignores the 3D hype, to offer a whole new technology



for displaying images – find out whether its extra yellow pixel helps deliver colour magic on page 74!

Elsewhere in this issue, we see Panasonic's triumphant proof that plasma display tech has plenty of life left in it (p82), and **enjoy the thunderous sounds of Onkyo's THX Ultra2-certified system** (p68). And don't forget that this is our annual Best Buy Awards issue, so you can suck in a year's worth of outstanding gear in one place (p35) – if you're looking for a new hardware purchase, this is the place to start.

All this, plus the chance to win a share of £10,000 of Panasonic Full HD 3D home cinema kit – an ideal kick-off for a Summer of entertainment!!

Chris Jenkins
Editor

TEAM HCC

Rik Henderson:
Dep Ed Rik has worked on tech mags and videogames TV shows for two decades



Anton van Beek:
News Ed Anton began his pro-videophile career over 11 years ago



Mark Craven:
HCC's Production Editor can write shorthand – he can't read it, though



Steve May:
HCC's Editor-in-Chief has a stunning 20+ years as a CE journo on his clock



Chris Jenkins:
Our ISF-calibrated Editor used to run Future's Tech Laboratories



John Rook:
Art Editor John first worked on HCC back in 1999, when TVs were made of wood



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cinema systems
to be won!
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TECH LABS

Our guarantee to you:

Equipment reviewed in *Home Cinema Choice* is measured and quantified by Future Tech Labs, which for more than 15 years has set the standard for independent AV test & measurement. The findings of the Tech Labs are used to underpin the subjective opinions of our Reviews team, ensuring that you receive the best possible advice when it comes to planning your next purchase



CO-STARRING

This issue's team of expert writers are the best qualified in the business

Martin Pipe:

Technology specialist
Martin co-developed HCC's
Tech Lab operation



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Apple fanatic Hill is the
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and a *What Hi-Fi* escapee



Richard Stevenson:

Industry veteran and former
Editor of UK CE trade
journal *ERT*



Alvin Gold:

One of the UK's most
experienced and respected
hi-fi and audio experts



Barry Fox:

A veteran commentator on
consumer electronics in
mags such as *New Scientist*



Adrian Justins:

Made his name as the editor
of *What Video & TV* and
What Home Cinema



PLAYBACK

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44 Inch Chest (BD)

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With its new sub-pixel, does this 46in Quattron LCD conjure up colours you've never seen before?

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Room-rocking bass is the order of the day with this flexible 5.1 speaker system

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Get the best of Freesat and Freeview HD with this stunning 50in NeoPDP plasma

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The once prolific projector brand is reborn with a brand new mid-range DLP model

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This 500GB twin tuner Freesat+ DTR is sure to please HD TV junkies

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A second-gen pocket-sized NAS box with some big ambitions

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Japanese giant takes a 'no-frills' approach with its new HDD/DVD recorder

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With its Profile 1.1 spec, this entry-level Blu-ray player is a real blast from the past

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An unusual and affordable alternative for wall-mounting your flatscreen TV

98 Raising the bar

Soundbars are an ideal solution for anyone lacking the space for a full surround system TVs. To help you decide what's best for you, we've put four models up against each other in our latest group test...

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Yamaha YSP-5100

Monitor Audio Radius One HD

Teufel Cinebar 50

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130 Next Issue

Exclusive review of Panasonic's 50in plasma and 3D Blu-ray player

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BULLETIN

→ **News highlights** HDMI v1.4 AVR Onkyo unleashes 3D-savvy amp
FREEVIEW+ HD Pace takes cover off Freeview HD PVR **BACK TO SCHOOL** Exclusive look at how Sony is training the next generation of 3D filmmakers **BLACK BEAUTY** Screen Innovations has a projector screen with a difference **TRACKER** What's hot and what's not in the world of AV?

Making Blu movies

Panasonic DMR-BW880EBK → www.panasonic.co.uk

The next generation of Panasonic's Blu-ray recorders will arrive in the UK in time for the FIFA World Cup this Summer. Top of the range is the BW880EBK, which features a 500GB HDD and twin Freeview+HD tuners, allowing users to record two digital broadcasts simultaneously, or record one and watch another. The Blu-ray recording functionality then lets you archive your hi-def recordings to disc. The BW880EBK is currently scheduled to hit shelves in the last week of May/first week of June, priced around £800.



HCC Online...

Looking for breaking AV news, blogs, features, & reviews? For your daily fix visit us at www.homecinemachoice.com Follow us on Twitter @hccmag

World's first 3D AVR

Onkyo TX-SR608 → www.onkyo.co.uk

AV receiver king Onkyo calls its new TX-SR608 'entry-level', but it's leading-edge in tech terms, thanks to its six HDMI v1.4 outputs that make it compatible with the latest 3D Blu-ray players. Other features of this £450 AVR include THX Select2 Plus certification, 160W-per-channel amplification, Audyssey DSX and Dolby Pro-Logic IIz support and Faroudja DCDi Cinema upscaling. We reckon it'll sell like hot cakes!



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Glass loudspeaker expert

Waterfall Audio has launched a diminutive new satellite speaker. It's based around a 3in drive unit housed in a die-cast aluminium chassis with a safety-glass surround. Marrying eye-catching aesthetics with audio tailored to both hi-fi and home cinema needs, the speakers are available as part of a 5.1 package accompanied by the brand's 150W HFI active subwoofer. www.invisionuk.com



Super Audio pair



If you are one of the many home cinema fans who still spins

Super Audio CDs, then be aware that Denon has released two new products in its Advanced Evolution series of high-end stereo components.

The DCD-1510AE disc-spinner features many of the technologies used in the brand's high-end DCD-2010AE (including 32bit/192kHz DACs and a vibration-suppressing drive mechanism), but at the lower price of £900. Joining it at the same price is the PMA-1510AE 70W per channel integrated stereo amplifier.

www.denon.co.uk

Soccer silliness



Toshiba is taking a gamble on the FIFA 2010 World Cup with its England Expects campaign. It will

allows customers to claim back the cost of any Full HD REGZA TV (32in and above) and any of the company's laptops (featuring Intel Core i3, i5 or i7 processors) bought between April 12 and July 11 this year. The catch? England has to lift the trophy first! To take part, consumers register their new Tosh TV or laptop at the website below within seven days of purchase. If England wins, they can claim their cash back within 21 days of the final.

www.toshiba.co.uk/england

Base goes Blu



DF Solutions Ltd has upgraded its popular Base Media Server, making it now fully enabled for Blu-ray

disc storage, playback, and multiroom distribution. Base and Link clients can now be used as BD players directly, or the user can make an image of a Blu-ray from their PC, and Base will see the corresponding .iso file on the network and integrate this HD movie into the system's main library. Available exclusively in the UK through distributor AWE Europe, this latest iteration of the Base also allows installers to access and configure the unit over the internet.

www.awe-europe.com

Freeview HD gathers Pace

Two new set-top boxes arrive for the free-to-air platform

Digital TV technology brand Pace is entering the Freeview HD arena with two set-top boxes – one with a hard drive, one without. But the company stresses that its receivers will offer something quite different to the competition: simplicity.

Branded Philips, as Pace acquired the Dutch manufacturer's STB business in December 2007, much effort has been made with the aesthetics, giving them a more living-room friendly design than most peers. The PVR also features an illuminated strip to match a Philips Ambilight screen – although this can be turned off.

However, it is what is inside the boxes that is most interesting, or rather, what isn't in it. Whereas other manufacturers have opted to include other gadgetry in their Freeview HD offerings, Pace has dispensed with things like media streaming and YouTube access to keep its kit easy to use. Clear, concise electronic programme guides and basic Sky+ style recording functionality are aimed at those who may not have bought an STB before. Nicolas Laroche, Pace's Chief technical engineer, is keen to stress how simple it is, for example, to record a show on the fly: 'Each time I press on the red button, I increase [the recording] by ten minutes, so that's simple to use.'



Pace's Nicolas Laroche says the brand's Freeview HD+ PVR is simple to use

Ten minutes, press, ten minutes, press... It makes it understandable for my mother or my grandfather.'

Of course, you can always record shows from the EPG, and series-link them, while the recorder offers the usual smorgasbord of PVR functions, such as pausing live TV.

The PVR does contain one surprise though – a massive 500GB hard drive: 'I think it will be one of the largest available,' says Laroche. 'It can store 250 hours of standard-definition material – 125 hours of high-definition.'

And the storage space doesn't come at the cost of noise pollution. Unlike many receivers on the market, which can often sound like helicopters taking off, Pace's recorder is mostly silent. 'The ambient acoustics are just 26dB because of the design of the internal fan,' explains Laroche.

In short, while the boxes are simple, their design and conception has been anything but. A lot of work has gone into making them as basic as possible and they certainly offer

something different to what

will soon be a very packed market.

The Philips DTR5520 Freeview HD receiver costs £160 and is in the shops now. It will be followed in May by the HDT8520 500GB, twin tuner Freeview HD+ PVR at £300.



New Look: Designed for style gurus, as well as first-time buyers

Playlist...

Team HCC reveals its Playback picks of the last month

1 The Pacific (Sky Movies HD)



This lavish, explosive sequel to *Band of Brothers* is an AV treat. The HD visuals bring the action to terrifying life and the soundtrack will leave you shell-shocked. SM

2 Cougar Town (Living)

This Courteney Cox sitcom blends *Scrubs*, *SATC* and *Friends* in a weekly dose of MILF-hunting mirth. CJ



3 This is Spinal Tap (Region B BD)



Revisiting *This is Spinal Tap* on Blu-ray has reinforced my belief that it is far more than just a sequence of quotable gags. RH

4 The Expendables Trailer (online)



Not a movie as such, but I can't stop watching the official trailer for this Summer's Stallone/Statham actioner! MC

5 Just Cause 2 (Xbox 360)



Non-stop action, huge explosions and grappling helicopters make this cracking game the nearest thing to a Michael Bay flick. AvB

Tracking

HCC's guide to what's going up and what's going down in AV-ville

▲ IPTV Subscription

The trend for web-connected TVs shows no signs of slowing down, with new research from Strategy Analytics predicting that the number of global viewers subscribing to IPTV services will hit 65 million by 2014.

▲ Digital TV

On the last day of March, Wales became the first country in the UK to complete the switchover from analogue to digital TV. Next up is the STV North region.

▼ Power-hungry TVs

Many of the UK's biggest high-street retailers have volunteered to take part in a scheme launched by the Energy Saving Trust to purge the least energy-efficient TVs from the market. The scheme has identified 42-47in TVs as the worst offenders.

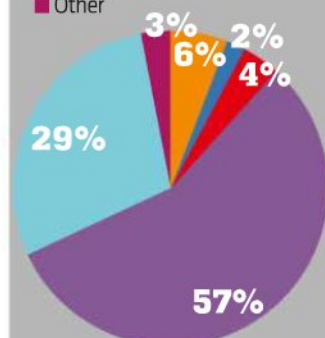
▼ DAB Ads

The Advertising Standards Authority has banned a radio campaign produced by the Digital Radio Development Bureau on the grounds that it misleads listeners that DAB radio doesn't suffer from signal interruptions like analogue. D'oh!

We asked...

What best describes the audio of your home cinema setup?

- Just my TV's speakers
- Sound bar
- 2.1 system
- 5.1 system
- 6.1/7.1 system
- Other



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action

Back to school for 3D

Sony launches 3D training for Hollywood cinematographers

On soundstage seven in Columbia Studios, Hollywood crews are relearning their trade. Why? To learn how to shoot 3D films. According to Sony, hundreds of cinematographers have signed up for the free three-day courses run out of its 3D Technology Centre that opened on the lot in January. 'It's easy to make 3D,' explains Buzz Hayes, chairman of the new facility, 'but it's very hard to make it good.'

When HCC visited the set, a cameraman was demonstrating the two-camera 'splitter rig', where one camera is mounted on top of the other. As stuntmen work through a fight scene in an alley-way left over from the last *Spider-Man* film, he experiments with the stereoscopic effect by adjusting the space between the two lenses. When a fist bursts out of the monitor at the side of the set, the small audience wearing the obligatory dark glasses gives appreciative applause.

The training school reflects Hollywood's concern that a rush to ride the *Avatar* bandwagon will lead to an inferior product that could do the format more harm than good. For Sony, it is an opportunity to pitch itself centre stage in what it thinks will be the biggest revolution since sound killed off silent pictures.

Sony claims 'lens-to-living-room' 3D prowess with an influence extending from Columbia Pictures, (bought in 1989), through cinema projectors and pro cameras, to TVs and Blu-ray players.

No joke

Buzz Hayes told HCC that talk of 3D being a gimmick is ridiculous: 'We see



'We have to understand how to tell 3D stories,' believes Sony's Buzz Hayes

our world in three dimensions and should build our entertainment into that.' But he is not expecting all Hollywood

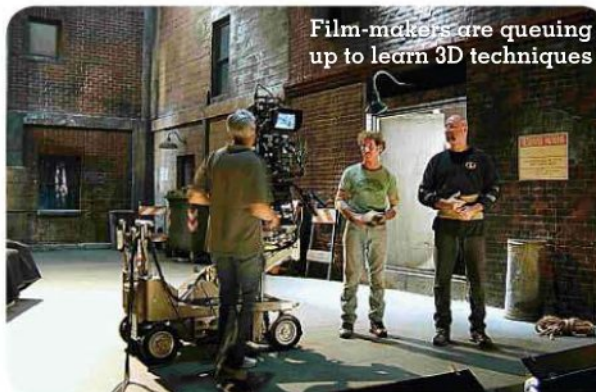
releases to be 3D, pointing out that it took a long time for colour to fully replace black and white.

Change is already underway. Brand-new jobs are opening up for 'stereographers' and 'convergence pullers'. New principles for film storytelling are starting to emerge. 'We have to understand how to tell 3D stories because we're not fully there yet,' said the Sony man.

3D films require fewer edits to establish spatial relationships, and lighting is used to focus attention on a part of the screen rather than traditional depth-of-field techniques.

Hayes said 3D has already outgrown pop-out screen effects and can develop into something much more dramatic, not just for action blockbusters. 'The psychological impact has not been explored yet. When you think of the scene in *The Silence of the Lambs*, when Hannibal Lecter steps forward to intimidate Clarice Starling, he

stays in the frame. Imagine it with 3D, and he would step out of it and be in your space.' There's also talk of converting old film classics to 3D, but Hayes has reservations. 'Some would be great fun. But some would be like spray-painting the Mona Lisa.'



i-Can has HD?



Swiss-based Advanced Digital Broadcast has thrown its hat

into the Freeview HD ring with the debut of its first UK consumer product, the i-Can Easy HD. More than just a 'mere' Freeview HD STB, this hybrid receiver is Pay-TV ready and can connect to 'net applications for catch-up TV services and 'future interactive offers'. Prices were unavailable at press, but ADB promises that the system will be on shelves in time for this Summer's FIFA World Cup. www.adbglobal.com

Big bad wolf



Featuring an impressive 16 minutes of previously unseen footage, an Extended Cut of the gore-strewn *The Wolf Man* is hitting DVD and Blu-ray in the UK on June 7. Extensive extras are promised, including U-Control, two alternate endings, four featurettes and a doc covering 70 years of Universal's *Wolf Man* movies. However, we're still waiting to see if the UK BD will carry over the most exciting extra from the US release – the ability to stream the 1941 original via BD-Live! www.universalpictures.co.uk

Black beauty



Screen Innovations' Black Diamond II projector screens are now available in the UK from Anthem AV

Solutions. Combining a positive 1.4 gain material with a wider viewing angle, the new Black Diamond II claims to enhance projector performance with blacker blacks, whiter whites and greater colour accuracy in both dark and bright environments. Maximum screen sizes available are 142in diagonal (2.40:1), 113in diagonal (16:9), and 93in diagonal (4:3). www.anthemavs.co.uk

This month's top ten news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...

1 World's biggest PVR...

As proof-of-concept tech goes, this one's a doozy. The talented chaps at US TV search software developers SnapStream have built what they're calling 'the world's largest DVR'. This mammoth beast can record up to 50 channels simultaneously and packs a total of 136TB of storage. According to their calculations, this means you can store up to 13 years of content!



2 Football crazy

FIFA and Sony have revealed which games will be filmed and broadcast live in 3D at the 2010 World Cup.

Due to the logistics of camera placement, only five of the stadiums can accommodate 3D recording – which means you won't get to see England play in 3D unless they get beyond the group stage. And you'll still have to make your way to one of 50 cinemas and five entertainment venues across the country that will screen 3D games.

3 Best of both worlds?

LG has said it will launch both Active Shutter and Passive Polarisation 3DTVs into the UK market, a month or so after pulling Passive tech tellies from its commercial lineup. 'Consumers have demanded that we offer them a choice,' U-turned LG suit George Mead.

4 Made for TV sound

Dolby will debut a new theatrical surround sound format, Dolby Surround 7.1, in cinemas this Summer, on the Disney/Pixar 'toon *Toy Story 3*. The system mimics a configuration which has been available to home users for some time: L, C, R, Left Surround, Right Surround, Back Surround Left, Back Surround Right, and LFE.

5 'No-glasses' for 3D on the go

Over in Japan, Sharp has been showing off a new 'no-glasses' 3D touchscreen LCD display developed for portable devices. The technology is currently unsuitable for large screens, due to a maximum viewing distance of 30cm, but it's thought that the 3.4in touchscreen panel on show could well end up being used in the next generation of Nintendo's popular handheld consoles, expected to be called the 3DS.

6 Plus ça change?

DivX has released a free software package dubbed DivX Plus with an interface that simplifies the process of watching and sharing hi-def content. Other features include smoother winding, and support for 1080p HD H.264-based videos in the MKV format.

7 Virgin player on the way

Virgin Media will launch a rival service to the BBC's iPlayer and BSkyB's Sky Player later this year. Speaking at the IPTV World Forum, Virgin Media's Alex Green declared the service would let subscribers access content both online and via mobiles, and suggested that HD fare will be available, too.

8 Runco gets certified

High-end projector brand Runco has received THX certification for four of its recent models. The VX-33i and VX-33d DLP projectors and Q-750i and Q-750d LED projectors have all been awarded the THX Display badge, the latter two being the first LED projectors in the world to get the prestigious classification.

9 Blu-ray gets bigger

Never one to stop fiddling, the Blu-ray Disc Association has announced two new media

specifications designed to increase the capacity and capability of Blu-ray discs. Thankfully, both the new BDXL (High Capacity Recordable and Rewritable) and IH-BD (Intra-Hybrid) disc specs are targeted at commercial markets – a good thing for consumers as they need all-new technology to play them.

10 Sex and violence R.I.P.

A new service that automatically screens out content unsuitable for children from DVDs is launching in the UK this Summer. The first ClearPlay DVD player will hit these shores in July, and can then be used in conjunction with film-specific filters downloaded from the ClearPlay site to skip or mute scenes that might upset the kiddie-winks in films rated 12 or under. Now, how about one that just plays all of the rude bits for us adults?



Premiere

HCC's guide to what's happening in the world of TV and films...

Greengrass goes 3D



Fresh from the box office failure of his Iraq War thriller *Green Zone*, director Paul Greengrass is reportedly eyeing up a more commercial project for his next film. Greengrass has been linked to a 3D remake of the 1966 sci-fi classic *Fantastic Voyage*, which is being produced by James Cameron's Lightstorm.

Don't forget your toothbrush

Following months of speculation, Chris Evans (the one who played the Human Torch in the *Fantastic Four* films, not the Radio 2 DJ) has signed on to play Captain America in a trilogy of films based on the popular Marvel superhero, plus the crossover flick *The Avengers*.

Passing the Buck

Resident Evil director Paul WS Anderson will helm a big budget outing for pulp sci-fi icon Buck Rogers. He's not taken on the scripting duties though, leaving that job to *Iron Man* co-writers Art Marcum and Matt Holloway.

Thurman flops

Uma Thurman's latest film *Motherhood* set tongues wagging for all the wrong reasons when it opened in the UK in March. Plans to create a buzz for the film by only launching it at one cinema (London's Apollo West End) went badly wrong when it made just £88 on its opening weekend.

Up from the depths...



Godzilla is set to return to Hollywood. Legendary Pictures has signed an agreement with Toho Studios to produce a fresh US take on the iconic Japanese monster for release in 2012.

News x10



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POINT OF VIEW

Richard Stevenson calculates the amount of power needed to reach Reference level audio – and starts to panic

Watts. You just can't have enough of 'em. You'd be surprised just how many Watts you actually need. So many in fact, that every AV amp and receiver on the market today is massively underpowered.

I've always been of the opinion that more is more where home cinema amplifier power is concerned. Not only does more power equate to increased dynamic range and better headroom, larger amplifiers seem to have an easy grace at lower volume levels that make movies more natural-sounding. And, of course, if you want to 'go large' for an evening of *Die Hard* action, then bag-fulls of ultra-clean Watts are absolutely essential. I run some fairly meaty power amplifiers, ten channels of 200W, for that very reason. But attending a recent CEDIA Home Cinema Design workshop made me realise just how much power is required and just how woefully far off the mark my home cinema system is. I haven't sobbed in a classroom like that since primary school.

Let me explain. A number of important bodies in the cinema industry did a lot of research and agreed on 'Reference' levels for parameters like sound pressure level (SPL), dynamic range, room liveliness etc. In a 'small room' (i.e anything that is not a large commercial auditorium) the Reference SPL is an unclipped, distortion-free 105dB at the listening position. That is loud but it's not deafeningly loud. Rock concerts are a whole lot louder than that. In fact, **105dB doesn't even sound that hard to achieve. But it is.**

Most domestic loudspeakers have an efficiency of somewhere between 87 and 90dB per Watt at 1m distance. The trouble is that sound pressure is logarithmic so it requires a doubling of power to produce just 3dB more. So if we take a typical 87dB/W efficient speaker, it will produce 87dB for 1W input, 90dB for 2W, 93dB for 4W, 96dB for 8W.... and so on, until you realise that to achieve

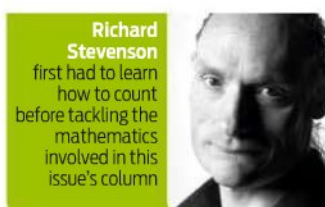
105dB you actually require 64W. Now that's not a massive amount, and most AV amps can kick out this sort of power without throwing a transistor out of their case, but there's another problem – the Reference level states 105dB at the listening position. As the distance from the speaker increases the direct sound pressure level drops off dramatically, some 6dB every time the distance is doubled. Even accounting for sound that bounces back off the walls and ceiling, the drop off is still in the order of 4dB to 5dB per doubling of the listening distance. If our speaker is making 105dB at 1m it will only be producing about 100dB at 2m and around 96dB at a typical listening position of 4m – a total SPL drop-off of about 9dB.

The speaker needs to produce at least 114dB at 1m to achieve 105dB at the listening position. We need more power. A 128W amp would be required to make 108dB at 1m, 256W for 111dB and a whopping 512W to achieve 114dB. No integrated AV amp or receiver gets close to that figure and there are precious few domestic loudspeakers that could take that sort of current without going into meltdown anyway.

What is the answer? Clearly more power is the obvious one, but it has its drawbacks. 500W power amps don't come cheap, especially when you need seven of them, and speakers to handle 500W are large and outrageously expensive. The most practical solution is to look for more efficient speakers. Even using 90dB/W models in the above example halves the power requirement to achieve 105dB at the listening position to 256W. Speakers of 93dB/W would lower it to a highly achievable 128W per channel.

So it's perhaps unfair to say that all home cinema amps are massively underpowered. It is probably far more accurate to say that all home cinema speakers are massively inefficient ●

For more of Richard Stevenson's theories log on to www.homecinemachoice.com/points_of_view



Richard Stevenson first had to learn how to count before tackling the mathematics involved in this issue's column

Cinema with a licence to thrill



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DVD ADDICT

When it comes to 3D movies, **The Beek** has reached the end of his tether. And here's why

Before I wrote this column, I endured a 3D-themed week. Was it fun? Not really. In fact, it highlighted the many problems that stereoscopic entertainment is bringing with it both in cinemas and our homes.

First, I attended Panasonic's 3D product launch at London's AIR Studios. The kit on show was pretty impressive – the Full HD 3DTV and Blu-ray tech on display was easily the best I've yet had the chance to play with – but things didn't go as smoothly as the company will have hoped.

Following a series of presentations from various industry spokespeople, the centrepiece of the day was a three-track set by musician Paul Carrack. Filmed in 3D in the neighbouring studio, the stereoscopic visuals were streamed live to a 103in TV, to illustrate how wonderful the addition of a third-dimension is to any entertainment experience. A fine idea to be sure, but there was a problem with the alignment of the camera rigs being used. Instead of a thrilling display of a live three-dimensional broadcast, all I took away from the event was a blinding headache caused by the two images not melding properly. Which, I have to guess, wasn't the effect Panasonic was aiming for.

The Panasonic launch also highlighted another problem with 3D Blu-ray – the lack of things to watch on it.

During the press conference the company revealed that it had signed exclusivity deals with 20th Century Fox and Universal to make the 3D Blu-ray versions of *Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs* and *Coraline* available for a limited time only to those who buy Panasonic's 3D kit. This follows news that Samsung has signed an exclusivity deal with DreamWorks to the 3D BDs of *Monsters Vs Aliens* and the *Shrek* movies for a 12-month period.

I wonder what discs will be available to actually buy in stores this year? At the moment, it's at best looking like Disney's *A Christmas Carol*, a FIFA 2010 World Cup highlights disc and Sony's *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*. But that's only if Disney doesn't tie up an exclusivity deal with another of the manufacturers.

Moving into next year, don't think that these same technology giants aren't already fighting amongst one another to ensure they get a similar period of exclusivity with the 3D Blu-ray release of *Avatar*. If that happens, **you may have to wait until early 2012 before you can go into a shop and buy a 3D disc of Cameron's sci-fi blockbuster** without having to shell out for a new 3D BD deck as well.

Clash of the cinemas

With this troubling my mind, I decided to treat myself to a double-bill of *Kick-Ass* and *Clash of the Titans* at the cinema later in the week. *Kick-Ass* was a lot of fun. I've still no idea whether *Clash of the Titans* is any good because, despite hunting high and low, I couldn't find a cinema anywhere showing the film in its original 2D form. Anywhere in central London, anyway. Of course, if I wanted to pay more to see the version with rushed post-production 3D effects added to it, I was spoilt for choice. But actually watching the film as the director originally intended it to be shown, before Warner Bros. realised it could milk more cash out of cinema-goers by hurriedly converting *Clash...* into 3D? Not a chance. I suppose I'll just have to wait for the (traditional 2D) Blu-ray release later this year to see the film in the format I want to see it, without having to pay extra for a pointless stereoscopic gimmick.

*Will you always pay extra to watch a 3D version of a movie?
Let us know: email hcc@futurenet.co.uk*

Anton van Beek wanted to see *Clash of the Titans* because he loves Greek mythology, and often comes into the office riding a giant scorpion



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TECH TANTRUM

The issue of projector lamps and their warranties is getting our consumer attack dog **Barry Fox** a little hot under the collar

One of my most unhappy AV memories is fighting Dell over a dud projector lamp. It failed well within the projector guarantee period but Dell wanted £238 (two thirds the cost of the projector) for a replacement.

Dell, along with Panasonic and Sony, only gives a measly 90 days on projector lamps.

I called Dell's bluff and started County Court proceedings under the Sale of Goods Acts, claiming that the projector was not of 'quality that a reasonable person would regard as satisfactory, fit for purpose, free from defects and durable.' Dell caved in and paid up in full, plus my legal fees. But I have since looked very closely at projector warranties.

Most projectors now use Ultra High Performance or Ultra High Pressure lamp technology (UHP) developed by the Philips Research Centre in Aachen, Germany, in 1995, and first used in 1997.

It's been so successful that in 2004 Philips won an Emmy Award for Technology and Engineering for UHP, stopped making projectors and just earned a packet from the lamps.

See you in quartz

The tech behind UHP is impressive. It works by sealing mercury vapour in a quartz bulb at a hundred times the pressure of a car tyre. The lamp is 'struck' by feeding 5000 volts between electrodes to create a plasma arc, kept alive with a pulsed supply that progressively reduces to around 100 volts.

The electrode gap is just 1mm wide, which concentrates over 100W of lighting power into a very small source which is as bright as the sun. The temperature is over 1,000°C, and the light so rich in ultraviolet that it would quickly blind anyone looking at a bare lamp. The lamp can take up to an hour after switch on to give true colour, and cannot be quickly switched on and off.

Unfortunately, there's a yawning gap between the 10,000-hour life promised by Philips and the skinflint warranties offered by PJ makers.

Replacement lamps cost at least £200; but beware cheaper lamps that may be copies and can be half as bright with patchy light. Some imitations are the wrong size or shape and difficult to fit. Forcing is dangerous. And, **if the quartz breaks, the lamp literally explodes, shooting out sharp slivers and toxic chemicals.**

So the new breed of LED projectors, with lamps that last around 70,000 hours and can be switched on and off instantly, sound pretty exciting. Because separate Red, Green and Blue LEDs are used, there is no DLP colour wheel, so no 'rainbow effect', the colour strobing which viewers may see if they move their head rapidly while watching the projected picture.

But don't get too excited, too soon. LEDs are expensive, and light output is less than for UHP lamps, and, contrary to popular belief, high-power LEDs do not run cool.

Runco's Q-750 1080p single chip, fan-cooled LED projector costs around £18,000, yet the company recommends a maximum screen width of well under 100in, even in a dark room.

The Italian company SIM2 promises 'well over 100,000 hours' for its £15,000 MICO 50 LED projector. But it's as big as a carry-on suitcase.

When demonstrating at the British Film Institute's screening room in London, UK MD Alan Roser joked about the 'plumbing' inside. But he wasn't joking. The three LEDs inside generate so much heat that they need a liquid cooling system, which looks just like a miniature car radiator with pumps, pipes and fans.

Presumably anti-freeze is needed, too, to make sure the projector survives a cold winter... ●

Had a bad experience with a projector lamp? Let us know: email hcc@futurenet.co.uk

Never afraid to fight dirty, **Barry Fox** uses UHP lamps to blind his enemies before kicking them in the shins and running away



Tech diary

The world of AV and film changes fast. Our calendar means you don't miss out



Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
10 Nowhere Boy Today sees the UK DVD and Blu-ray release of Sam Taylor Woods' award-winning account of John Lennon's teenage years in Liverpool and his friendship with Paul McCartney www.nowhereboy.co.uk				7 Four Lions Brass Eye creator Chris Morris courts controversy once again with his feature film directorial debut – a comedy about four incompetent British jihadists. It hits cinemas across the UK from today MAY		
				14 Robin Hood Ridley Scott and Russell Crowe join forces once again to deliver this epic re-imagining of the legendary story of Robin Hood. Expect arrows to fly when this hits UK cinemas today www.universalpictures.com	15 Hello Mickey Future Disney icon Mickey Mouse made his debut on this day in 1928 in the six-minute silent cartoon <i>Plane Crazy</i> , where the loveable rodent builds his own airplane, takes a cow for a ride and ends up crashing into a tree	16 And the winner is... It was on this day in 1929 that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences handed out the very first Academy Awards during a private brunch at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel. The ceremony only lasted 15 minutes!
17 Connected Home IPTV, VoIP, web and video-on-demand technologies are at the heart of this series of industry seminars held in Rotterdam today www.connectedhomeevent.eu	18 Fangs for the memory Bram Stoker's novel <i>Dracula</i> was first published on this day in 1897. To celebrate, spend the day watching those classic Hammer flicks starring Christopher Lee as the blood-sucking Count		20 PALM Expo & Install China China's leading industry expo for audio, lighting and entertainment technology runs from now until May 23 at Beijing's China International Exhibition Centre www.palmexpo.net	21 Prince of Persia The popular videogame franchise hits cinemas across the UK this Friday with an FX-packed blockbuster starring Jake Gyllenhaal as the decidedly un-Persian looking Prince www.disney.com		
24 Up in the Air Today sees the UK DVD and Blu-ray release of this acclaimed drama, with George Clooney playing a man who makes his living firing people www.theupintheairmovie.com				28 The Losers Oh look, it's another comic book adaptation. But at least this one seems a bit different, dealing with the members of a CIA black ops team seeking revenge on the people who left them for dead. At UK cinemas today	29 Happy Birthday 'La-la, la-la, Diddy-diddy, Diddy-diddy, Bum-bum, Bum-bum!' Frequent Tim Burton collaborator and award-winning composer Danny Elfman turns 57 today	
31 The Book of Eli Denzel Washington kicks plenty of ass in this terrific post-apocalyptic action adventure flick, which should do great business when it slices its way onto DVD and BD in the UK this Monday			3 HCC #183 Start saving your pennies for HCC #183, which hits the stands this Thursday, packed to the gills with hardware tests, features, outspoken opinion and full-on software reviews www.homecinemachoice.com JUN			

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Team HCC praises the
SFX work of Weta



Lords of illusion

The kind of films we love at HCC often involve plenty of special effects. You see, you can get away with filming a rom-com entirely on location with regular actors, but try making a movie like, say, *Star Wars* without a bit of visual trickery and you'll come unstuck. In fact, more and more films produced in Hollywood and elsewhere use SFX, predominantly digital, to help transport audiences into the worlds they create.

One company at the forefront of movie SFX is Weta, the Wellington, New Zealand-based production house made famous by its work on *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Set up in 1993 by... *Rings* director Peter Jackson, Richard Taylor and Jamie Selkirk, Weta (now split in to Weta Digital for special effects and Weta Workshop for physical effects) has since been involved on numerous projects, including *X-Men: The Last Stand*, *I, Robot*, *District 9*, and, most recently, *Avatar*, for which it trousered an Academy Award for Best Visual Effects – meaning it's now collected five in its brief 17-year history.

Monkey magic

Perhaps one of Weta's most startling achievements was 2005's *King Kong*. While the

1933 original is memorable for Willis H. O'Brien's stop-motion animation and model work, there was little chance of the same technology being used for Universal's big-budget remake. Step forward the Kiwi CG wizards, whose involvement in the film can be seen in almost every frame; not only in the scarily believable Kong (motion-captured from actor Andy Serkis' simian impersonations) and the prehistoric beasts of Skull Island, but in the authentic recreation of Depression-era New York. For instance, when King Kong scales the Empire State Building and is besieged by planes, it's not just the giant ape that is digitally faked – it's the whole shot.

Next up for Weta are Guillermo del Toro's *Hobbit* movies and the Spielberg/Jackson *Tintin* trilogy. The latter should be another SFX masterpiece, with Weta using performance-capture technology to blend Hollywood actors into Georges Rémi's distinctive cartoon visuals. We expect the end results to be breathtaking.

So, in the same way that a BSI Kitemark on a firework means it won't blow up in your face, Weta's work on a movie ensures the SFX won't be ropery. The film itself might be, though... ●

SFX guru: Richard Taylor
co-founded Weta in 1993



Quintessential Weta... Gandalf goes down in The Fellowship of the Ring



1 Flaming hell

Weta Digital really gets the chance to show off its creature-design skills with the monstrous Balrog



2 'None shall pass!'

As the Fellowship flees the Mines of Moria, Gandalf stays behind to stop the infernal creature's progress



3 Mind the gap

The seamless integration of CG creature and real actor shines through as the Balrog plummets to its doom



4 'Fly you fools!'

Leaving viewers with one final memorable quote before Gandalf too falls to his death!

Must own...



District 9

Sony Pictures → All-region BD
£25 Approx

This electrifying political commentary/sci-fi provided fertile ground for Weta's creature designers, as they were put in charge of bringing the alien 'prawns' to life on the bigscreen.

24.45: Despite the docu-style 'shaky-cam' visuals, Weta's CG alien is seamlessly integrated into the footage and interacts with the human cast as it tries to flee.

90.50: Wikus prepares to kick ass with some newly acquired Mech armour in this prime piece of demo fodder.



LotR: The Return of the King

Entertainment in Video → R2
Extended Edition DVD → £36 Approx

While the entire trilogy is a modern classic, the final part (especially in its Extended Cut form) pulls out all of the stops with the biggest fantasy battle scenes ever brought to screen. And there's plenty of Gollum as well – easily Weta's best-known CG creation.

Disc Two – 37.45: Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas lead an undead army into battle against Sauron's armies.

Disc Two – 80.07: Frodo and Gollum scrap above the Crack of Doom.



I, Robot

20th Century Fox → Region B BD
£23 Approx

Will Smith gets jiggy with creepy-voiced robots in this Isaac Asimov sci-fi adaptation, with Weta taking charge of numerous CG-laden sequences.

50.08: 'You are experiencing a car accident'. Academy Award-nominated visual effects, incredible AV performance that makes it a prime piece of demo material for your home cinema system, and breathtaking action as Will Smith is attacked by two truckloads of rampaging robots! What more could you possibly want?



King Kong

Universal Pictures → All-region BD
£20 Approx

Peter Jackson's love letter to King Kong drags on a bit, but the SFX are never less than fantastic – be it the giant ape himself, the prehistoric inhabitants of Skull Island or the painstaking digital recreation of the Big Apple in the 1930s.

113.23: Looking for razor-sharp HD visuals and thunderous lossless audio?

Then you'll love this titanic tussle between Kong and a pair of dinosaurs.

176.31: King Kong + The Empire State Building + six bi-planes = a sad end for the mighty ape.

Worth seeing...



The Frighteners

Universal → R1 Director's Cut
DVD → £16 Approx

Another Peter Jackson outing, and the one that cemented Weta's status in the digital visual effects industry. Michael J Fox's psychic Frank, who can talk to the dead, ends up in big trouble when the Grim Reaper comes to town.

18.20: The first appearance of Frank's spectral chums Cyrus and Stuart showcases the pioneering CG work.

44.04: Between Danny Elfman's score and the dynamic use of the 5.1 soundstage, the Reaper's onscreen debut sends a shiver down your spine.



30 Days of Night

Icon → All-region BD
£11 Approx

David Spade's cracking adaptation of Steve Niles' acclaimed comic series finds out what happens when an Alaskan town is plunged into darkness for a month and invaded by vampires. The result is a pleasingly grim and gory take on an old horror favourite.

51.54: The vampires have a little 'fun' with one survivor in this extremely creepy sequence, which also highlights Weta's subtle, yet effective, prosthetic makeup.



Fantastic 4: Rise of the Silver Surfer

20th Century Fox → Region B BD
£23 Approx

The fact that this sequel improves on the first FF flick is mainly down to the work of Weta and its state-of-the-art CG representation of the Silver Surfer. The apparently liquid-metal character is leagues ahead of the similar villain from T2 and steals the show every time he appears on screen.

28.33: The chase sequence between the Surfer and the Human Torch is truly breathtaking, taking you around – and through – New York's skyscrapers. Rad!



X-Men: The Last Stand

20th Century Fox → All-region BD
£23 Approx

Following the departure of Bryan Singer, Fox bought in Brett 'Rush Hour' Ratner to direct the final part to what had been a brilliant superhero trilogy. And despite some great FX, the film is a stinker.

45.58: The stunning AVC encode and DTS-HD MA 6.1 mix get a real workout as Jean Grey unleashes her powers on Professor Xavier, while Wolverine goes head-to-head with Juggernaut.

3D competition

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- B)** Height, width and depth
- C)** Space, time and mass

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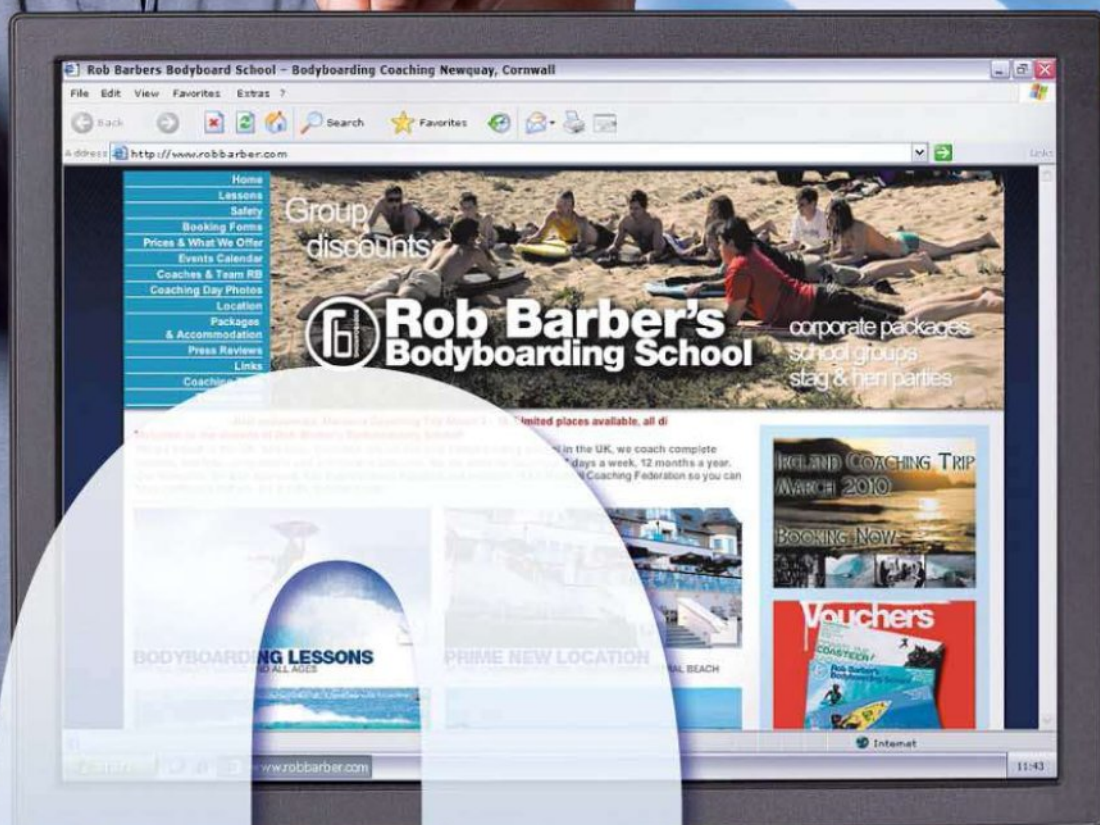


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Anton van Beek is guided through a stylish hi-tech makeover by its proud owner



Kit Checklist

Pioneer: 60in KRP-600A plasma, media receiver and bracket
Pioneer: SC-LX71 amplifier
Pioneer: BDP-LX91 Blu-ray player
Monitor Audio: Silver RX centre
Monitor Audio: Radius 270 fronts
Monitor Audio: Radius 180 rears
Monitor Audio: AW12 Sub
Virgin Media: V+ set-top box
Sony: PlayStation 3
Spectral: Catena cabinets, wall-hung
Belkin: 8-port Ethernet hub out to 50Mb broadband
Apple: Mac and HP PC Multimedia servers (upstairs)
Chord: Active Silver Plus 10m cable

Long-time *HCC* reader Chris England reckons his cinema room has an AV claim to fame – its Pioneer KRP-600A screen was one of the last ones ever sold.

Pitched as being 'more than the enthusiast piecing bits together and less than the full-blown dedicated home cinema', this front-room facelift shows just what can be achieved on a relatively small budget. 'The total cost of this project was just over £17,000,' says Chris, 'I think this is a price point which is more realistic for the home cinema living room.'

Having recently bought the new property, Chris immediately decided to change the traditional old-fashioned living room into a modern space that reflects his view of how homes are transforming. 'I believe the new house feature of the future won't be a fireplace, but how well-suited the living room is for entertainment: movies, games, music, on-demand facilities, etc,' he told *HCC*.

With the aid of his local branch of AV experts Sevenoaks Sound and Vision, Chris set about completely redesigning the room. The company's involvement stretched beyond recommending kit and planning the project, to AV wiring and even installing a false wall, which accommodates the Monitor Audio speakers, contains all of the cabling and houses the legendary Pioneer screen. And while the existing budget didn't allow for a projector, the room is pre-wired for one and a screen, which he hopes to add in the future.

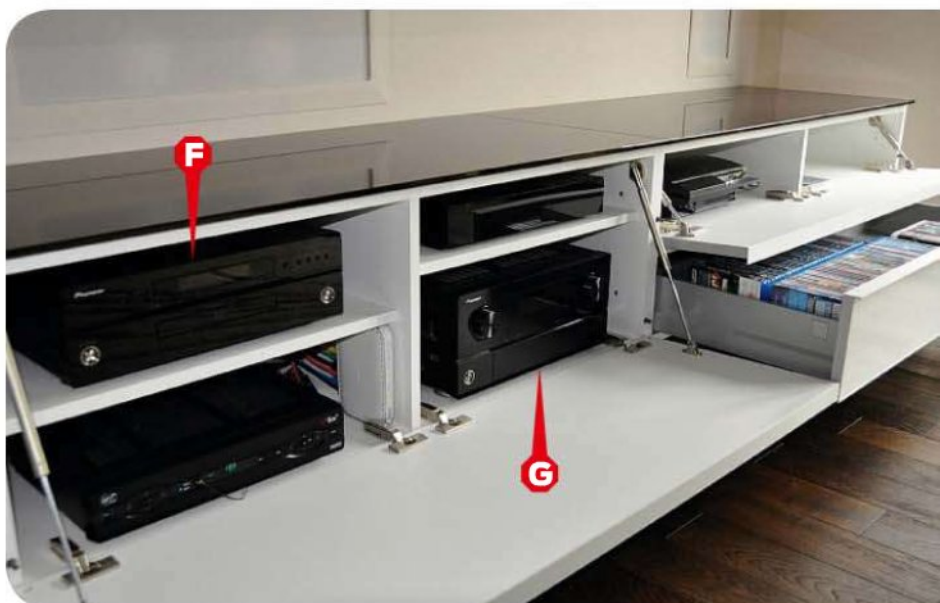
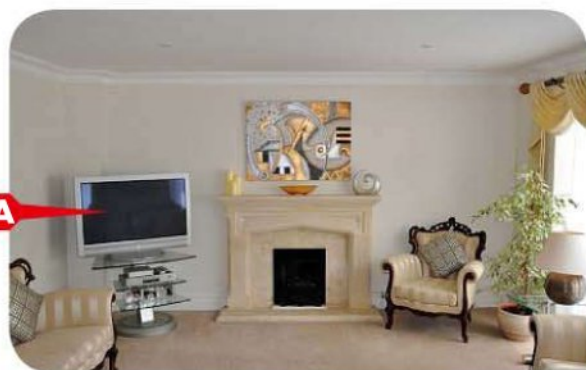
Chris is also full of praises for the Sevenoaks team for going 'beyond the realms of a standard job' and making the custom speaker covers to perfectly match the new wall. ➤

White out: Chris' viewing room has a clean, contemporary feel



AWARDS 2010 HOME CINEMA CHOICE

28 INSTALLS



A Before the change

'The old room as it originally was,' says the owner Chris, 'was very much a typical show home, with a carpet, fireplace, pictures, etc.'

B Fake wall

With the decision made to give the room a hi-tech makeover, the first step was to create a false wall to embed the hidden speakers and hang the Pioneer plasma

C Wired for sound

In addition to recommending kit, the Reading branch of Sevenoaks Sound and Vision were heavily involved with the build, including the AV wiring

D Room to improve

The speaker holes are designed to take much larger cabinets – Chris is already toying with the idea of upgrading

E Ready for action

With the wall finished and painted, all that remained to be done was to install the hardware and the Spectral Catena floating cabinets

F Only the best will do

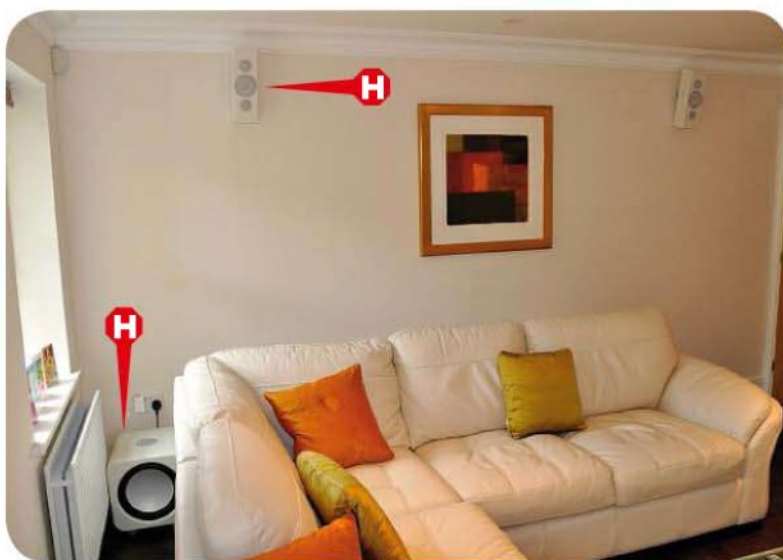
Ensuring that he gets the very best from his collection of Blu-rays, DVDs and CDs, Chris opted for Pioneer's BDP-LX91 disc-spinner – winner of the coveted Reference Status badge back in HCC #167

G Pioneer spirit

While plans are in place to upgrade the amp in the future (Chris has found the LX82 'very tempting'), it's not a major concern at the moment, as the Pioneer SC-LX71 he currently uses still 'sounds amazing'

H Bigger is better

Chris is using Monitor Audio Radius speakers for the fronts and rears from his previous set up. The centre and subwoofer were upgraded, though, as this room is too big for the models he previously owned



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Certified: AV-holic!

Every issue, **HCC readers** invite you to take a tour of their beloved home cinema setup...



Each to their own:
Stephen apparently loves the technical and equipment side of AV; Julie just enjoys watching the movies

Introduce yourselves...

Stephen Hepburn 39, Julie Hepburn 38.

And you're AV-holics?

Yes! We watch movies all the time when we are not working. We can't get terrestrial TV where we live and we haven't invested in satellite so the cinema meets all our movie needs.

What's in your setup?

A Mitsubishi HC5500 projector, Arcam AVR350 amplifier, a custom-built 92in DRH screen and a Panasonic DMP-BD55 Blu-ray player. The speakers are Mission 751s for the fronts and Mission M-Cubes for the surrounds, rears and sub.

What will be your next equipment purchase?

Well, our dream is to have a house where we can have a dedicated cinema room. The first bit of kit would be to upgrade the amplifier to an Arcam AVR600 or Arcam AV888/P777 pre/power combi. Better start saving!

How much have you spent on your AV habit over the years?

Between £4-£5K. Our current setup utilizes old hi-fi equipment (the Mission 751s) and in AV terms the rest of the equipment, except the Panasonic DMP-BD55, were old models so could be purchased new for a reasonable price.

What's your current fave disc?

We'll watch anything from world cinema to zombie movies. We're currently in the process of collecting our favourite movies on Blu-ray. Our pick at the moment is *Kill Bill 1 & 2*.

Are you excited about 3D?

Not really. We've both been disappointed when watching 3D films at the cinema. We've seen *Up* and *Avatar*; in many ways the 3D distracted from the films – as we were sat waiting for the 3D effects which only disappointed – and we both ended up with headaches! We're going to watch both films again without the 3D, on our own cinema ●

Room essentials

A 92in bigscreen

The projector screen was custom-made by DRH once the room had been measured

B Turn it up!

The Hepburns admit that the acoustics of their cinema/living room aren't great. 'But as we live in the middle of a glen on the West coast of Scotland we can play it as loud as we want!'

C LCD beamer

A Mitsubishi HC5500 is in charge of projection duties

D, E Problem solved

Arcam's AVR350 doesn't feature HD audio decoders, so it's hooked up to the Panasonic DMP-BD55 Blu-ray by the latter's 7.1 analogue outputs

Join the club

Do you want to see your home cinema system featured in the pages of *Home Cinema Choice*? If so, log on to www.homecinemachoice.com/avholic where you'll find all the information you need.

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Samsung LE32B650

Winner: Best TV 32in and under
First Reviewed: HCC #172

One of the UK's best-selling 32in screens, this CCFL-backlit LCD offers solid black levels (for great contrast) and excellent all-round video performance, making it ideal for both standard- and hi-def sources. Typically priced at £600 or less, its four HDMI v1.3 sockets offer plenty of system setup opportunities, and the design is a delight.



Also nominated...

Panasonic TX-L32G10

First Reviewed: HCC #172

While it's great with standard-def, this £800 Panasonic LCD TV's biggest stand-out feature is its in-built Freesat tuner. Grab one of these if you want to watch the World Cup in HD for nowt.

LG 32LH4000

First Reviewed: HCC #172

For a 32in TV, the £460 LH4000 was as cheap as chips even when it was first reviewed. You'd never know, considering its classy aesthetics and tidy picture performance.

JVC LT-32WX50EU

First Reviewed: HCC #181

As thin as a member of Girls Aloud, and, at £2,500, almost as expensive to entertain, this LCD stunner is actually a monitor. But as it's aimed at the CI market, that's fine with us.





Samsung UE40C7000



Winner: Best TV 37-42in
First Reviewed: HCC #180

Samsung's £1,800 UE40C7000 may be grabbing all the headlines because of its 3D compatibility, but an ability to travel into the third dimension is only one of its many talents. Indeed, the most impressive cannon in its arsenal is its access to online content via the company's Internet@TV app store, including LoveFilm and iPlayer video-on-demand support. A Freeview HD tuner and superlative LED-lit picture performance make this a category leader.

Also nominated...

Panasonic TX-P42S10

First Reviewed: HCC #177

Full HD plasmas have long been the screens of choice for cinephiles, with their excellent blacks and fast responses. This is our current 42in fave – yours for £750 or less.

LG 42SL9000

First Reviewed: HCC #178

LED-backlit, this one-grand 42incher gets the basics right with its excellent pictures, and offers some of the most impressive calibration controls we've ever seen.

Sony KDL-40EX503

First Reviewed: HCC #181

A Freeview HD TV tuner and a full complement of internet apps are the tantalising features of this splendid £900 40in LCD TV – Sony is back at the top of its game.





Philips Cinema 21:9

Winner: Best TV 46in and over
First Reviewed: HCC #171

Bold, ambitious and revolutionary, Philips steals our bigscreen TV trophy with the world's first 21:9 aspect ratio TV – a genuine game-changer in the display market. Able to show high-impact widescreen movie images without black-bar compromise, Cinema 21:9 is the only option if you truly want to create a cinematic TV-viewing experience in the home. The £4,500 CCFL-backlit original will get an LED makeover at this year's IFA expo – and just for fun the company is throwing in 3D compatibility, too. Highly recommended.



Also nominated...

Panasonic TX-P46Z1

First Reviewed: HCC #172

Priced at £4,300, Panasonic's Z1 won't, perhaps, sell like hot cakes. But its Wireless Full HD capabilities are a glimpse of a welcome future that we should all embrace.

Sony KDL-46Z5800

First Reviewed: HCC #177

Sony has proven with the 46Z5800 that there's life in CCFL backlighting yet. This Freesat-enabled set has 200Hz picture processing, and offers a lot of inches for its £1,900 tag.

Panasonic TX-P65V10B

First Reviewed: HCC #181

A weighty monster of a screen, Panasonic's £4,500 Full HD 65in plasma TV offers excellent contrast levels and a Freesat HD tuner. You'll have to reinforce the walls, though.



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LG BD390

Winner: Best Disc Player £350 and under
First Reviewed: HCC #174

More than just a disc-spinner, LG's BD390 has changed the perception of what a Blu-ray player can do. Combining top-drawer HD disc playback with the ability to play and stream other media files (including HD MKVs), it's a multimedia trendsetter. Bonuses such as integrated Wi-Fi, 7.1 analogue audio and brisk loading times add icing to the cake. Typically priced at £290, this model effectively moved LG into pole position in the mainstream Blu-ray market. A worthy winner.



Also nominated...

Panasonic DMP-BD85

First Reviewed: HCC #180

Panasonic's £300 deck is at the very top of the company's range, at least until its 3D offering arrives. Its internet and DLNA abilities are impressive, as is its command of BD video.

Samsung BD-C6900

First Reviewed: HCC #181

The first 3D-capable Blu-ray deck we've seen, Samsung's £350 BD-C6900 almost matches the LG BD390 in media-playing prowess and adds 3D BD compatibility.

Sony PlayStation 3 Slim

First Reviewed: HCC #174

It may not have the best AV performance, but the re-jigged £250 PS3 Slim is so abundant in features and abilities that it's an essential addition to any home cinema setup.



Sony BDP-S760

Winner: Best Disc Player over £350
First Reviewed: HCC #176



The BDP-S760 proudly dispenses with the bells and whistles found on many of its peers in favour of getting the basics right. There's no video-streaming, for instance, just an ability to display JPEG picture files, but as that is to the benefit of superlative video and audio performance, we're more than happy with the trade-off. Indeed, when it was reviewed, we called it 'a reference machine for the budget-conscious' – attributable to its £380 price point – and we still stand by that today.



Also nominated...

Denon DBP-4010UD

First Reviewed: HCC #179

Denon's £1,900 BD deck is much like a cut-down version of the company's incredible DVD-A1UD, and, like its bigger brother, adds SACD and DVD-A playback to the Blu-ray party.

Marantz BD7004

First Reviewed: HCC #179

The BD7004's price point of £700 is predominantly justified by its excellent audio performance, but its video playback and build quality are equally as impressive.

Pioneer BDP-LX52

First Reviewed: HCC #176

Positioned primarily as a player for those with an LX-branded Pioneer amp, the £500 LX52 swaps multichannel audio outputs for tasty sound and pictures.





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Samsung HT-BD1255

Winner: Best Home Cinema System
First Reviewed: HCC #179



Samsung's high-value £500 HT-BD1255 features four tall-boy surround speakers, a tidy centre channel and a 170W passive subwoofer, plus a fully-specc'd Profile 2.0 Blu-ray deck/AV receiver. There's even an iPod dock thrown in for good measure. And its sonic performance punches well above its weight. If you're looking for an all-in-one solution, this should be your first stop!



Also nominated...

Pioneer LX01BD

First Reviewed: HCC #169

Compact and bijou, the Pioneer LX01BD is a high-design concept with exemplary audio abilities. Its Profile 1.1 BD deck is tailored with the purist in mind, as is its £2,000 price tag.

LG HB354BS

First Reviewed: HCC #178

LG's 2.1 (stereo speakers and subwoofer) Blu-ray system is ideal for a second room or for those looking to keep their main viewing room tidy. At £400, it's a stylish steal.





KEF C Series AV5

Winner: Best Speaker System under £2,000
First Reviewed: HCC #179

For £900, KEF's 5.1 system – a combination of floorstanding fronts and diminutive surrounds – is a solid gold bargain. Each speaker is beautifully built, and their aluminium dome tweeters sing as sweet a song as many rivals costing twice as much. The C4 subwoofer, with its long-throw 8in driver, blends with the package superbly, and is surprisingly musical to boot. A brilliant set from a brand to be reckoned with.



Also nominated...

Focal JMLab Dome 5.1

First Reviewed: HCC #178

Beautifully designed, both aesthetically and acoustically, the one-and-a-half grand Dome 5.1 package from Focal JMLab is as meaty as it is cute. And we love the curvy subwoofer.

Monitor Audio Vector AV

First Reviewed: HCC #176

This dinky, wall-mountable compact 5.1 system offers huge scale and separation for its tiny £650 price tag. Its innovative finish makes it look more pricey still.

Vibe Monolith/Omicron

First Reviewed: HCC #172

Space-age design and startling potency make this £1,900 Vibe 5.1 setup well worth an audition. 'A very good-looking designer system with real muscle,' was our verdict.





Bowers & Wilkins CM Series



Winner: Best Speaker System £2,000-£5,000
First Reviewed: HCC #179

This Bowers & Wilkins 5.1 system certainly delivers when it comes to high-end components. Nautilus-derived tweeters? Check. Kevlar cones? Check. Indeed, as the Nautilus tech is also found in speakers costing around £55,000 a pair, the CM Series' £4,250 ticket is a steal – even more so considering the remarkable placement, fabulous clarity and deep bass response the entire package delivers.

Also nominated...

Cabasse iO2 System

First Reviewed: HCC #180

There's something very 1950s sci-fi movie about this Cabasse sub/sat's looks, yet its tasty audio performance comes from bang-up-to-the-minute technology. *Bien fait!*

Mission 79 Series

First Reviewed: HCC #171

Gorgeous tonality and sophisticated looks make this £2,400 Mission 5.1 system as capable with stereo music as it is with cinema bass-busters.

Teufel System 8 THX Ultra2

First Reviewed: HCC #181

Teufel's THX Ultra2-certified speaker system costs a tempting £2,700, but we think its performance is worth a stack more. A fine hardcore AV performer for THX fans.





Pioneer EX Series

Winner: Best Speaker System over £5,000
First Reviewed: HCC #170

This 5.1 array of Pioneer's EX Series (using its S3, S4 and S8 cabinets) is a reference-grade bargain – even at the lofty price of £11,000. Thanks to Coherent Source Transducer (CST) technology also found in the legendary TAD R1s, this system takes hi-res movie soundtracks and rewards you with beautiful imagery, pin-point accuracy and a soundscape so full of tiny detail you'll crackle with delight. Simply brilliant.



Also nominated...

Boston Acoustics VS Series
 First Reviewed: HCC #173

This exquisite-looking 5.1 system offers an astonishingly posh, detailed sound for its £5,500 all-in, courtesy of an insane amount of cones and some cleverly designed cabinets.

KEF XQ 5.1 System
 First Reviewed: HCC #174

British brand KEF has once again pulled out all the stops with its £5,050 XQ system. Its natural tone is so universally appealing, it'll suit any setup.

Paradigm Reference Signature
 First Reviewed: HCC #174

Yes, this 7.1 speaker package costs a great deal of money. But even that £19.5K price tag is justified by a super high-end performance that'll blow you and your neighbour's socks off.



Naim n-SUB



Winner: Best Subwoofer
First Reviewed: HCC #177

The £1,600 Naim n-SUB is as pretty as a box of bass can be. Available in maple, cherry and black lacquer finishes, its tapered front and prominent control panel set it apart from many contemporaries. The panel isn't just for show either, as it allows for fine control over gain, filter frequency and phase invert, ensuring that this subwoofer is an AV fiddler's dream. After an audition you certainly won't forget the Naim...



Also nominated...

Amphion Impact 500

First Reviewed: HCC #169

Beautiful and pure with its white finish, the £900 Amphion Impact 500 is definitely a sub for the style-conscious, but its bass performance is fast, tight and profound, too.

Tannoy TS1201

First Reviewed: HCC #179

Beneath its sleek, stealthy styling, Tannoy's £600 TS1201 packs a 12in driver and a 500W amp, which explains the size and scope of the bass it can deliver.

Velodyne SPL-1200 Ultra

First Reviewed: HCC #172

You can specify almost any coloured finish for Velodyne's £1,400 SPL-1200 Ultra, but no matter the paint job, the low-frequency rumblings are always tight and powerful.



The cutting edge of sound

DTS is at the forefront of surround sound technology. HCC reveals how the company is pioneering advanced audio formats and moving into exciting new areas

EVERY HOME CINEMA FANATIC KNOWS THAT

sound is half of the movie experience, and no company encompasses enthusiasm for cinema and domestic surround sound more than DTS. Founded in 1993, DTS developed a cinema sound system which added increased bandwidth and greater dynamic range to movie audio. It was launched to great acclaim with the release of Steven Spielberg's dinosaur epic *Jurassic Park*.

In 1996, DTS introduced a version of its system for domestic use, initially on LaserDisc, and since 2008 the company has focused solely on the home entertainment market. Of course, it's the emergence of DVD and Blu-ray which has brought DTS to the attention of most home cinema fans. The lossless DTS-HD Master Audio format has become a default for BD software, and delivers a bit-accurate audio experience.

Adding symmetry

But DTS is not the kind of company to rest on its laurels,

Up and away:
Lossless audio adds even more fun to the Pixar mix



and has developed a number of exciting new technologies to make the most of audio data in a wide range of listening environments.

DTS Symmetry, for instance, will be popular with anyone who has ever jumped out of their skin at a sudden volume change in movie sound, online content, CD listening, or even voicemail. DTS Symmetry balances loudness levels between diverse multimedia sources on your computer, to give a much more pleasant volume level no matter what audio comes in or out. Another DTS product with PC and gaming applications is Neural Surround, which converts seamlessly between stereo and 5.1-channel audio,

while DTS Surround Sensation UltraPC creates a virtual surround effect. Also new is DTS Boost, which offers listeners a dramatic increase in perceived loudness from laptop speakers.

Consistently raising the bar in the world of home theatre, DTS looks set to continue delivering the movie experience in its purest form.

DTS formats decoded



DTS Express

DTS Express is designed for network streaming, broadcast and internet applications. Encoded at constant bitrates with up to 5.1 channels for Blu-ray disc, it's commonly used on secondary audio tracks.



DTS Digital Surround

Often featured on DVD releases, most DTS Digital Surround soundtracks consist of 5.1 channels, but can contain fewer; for instance DTS 4.0 can have discrete audio signals for center, left, and right channels, plus a mono signal common to the surrounds. It's encoded at constant bitrates up to 1.509 Mbps.



DTS Digital Surround ES

DTS-ES is used to deliver 6.1-channel audio, and is encoded at constant bitrates up to 1.509 Mbps. It includes two variants, DTS-ES Matrix and DTS-ES Discrete 6.1, depending on how the sound was originally mastered and stored. DTS-ES Matrix provides 5.1 discrete channels, with a matrixed center-surround audio channel.



DTS provides premium-grade audio to match Blu-ray's stunning visuals

Five of the best DTS soundtracks...

The Lord of the Rings: The Motion Picture Trilogy

DTS-HD Master Audio 6.1

The new *Lord of the Rings* Blu-ray boxset is a real show-stopper when it comes to audio impact. Epic in scale, the mixes for all three films are bursting with spatial effects, booming LFE and immersive atmospherics.



Up

DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1

The latest Pixar movie doesn't just look great in hi-def, it also sounds superb thanks to the Blu-ray's lossless 5.1 mix. The amount of fine detailing in the DTS-HD MA audio, from creaking floorboards to the squeak of balloons bumping in to each other, is simply breathtaking in its precision and clarity.



Terminator Salvation: Director's Cut

DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1

Epic dynamic range and an incredible sense of directional movement make you feel like you're right there, doing battle with Skynet's rampaging robots, in this sci-fi blockbuster sequel.



Band of Brothers

DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1

The audio across this epic Spielberg-produced WWII TV series puts many film releases to shame. You'll be diving for cover during the battle scenes as bullets fly past your head and explosions shake you off your chair.



Fight Club: 10th Anniversary Edition

DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1

This amazing soundtrack hits home like Brad Pitt's fist in your face, thanks to the punishing bass and highly aggressive sonic steering. Yet, incredibly, the accomplished mix doesn't lose track of the subtleties that exist within the aural assault.



DTS Digital Surround 96/24

DTS Digital Surround 96/24 offers high-quality multichannel audio on DVDs. Its 24bit depth means it can carry more audio information than 16bit CDs, and the 96KHz sampling rate can capture super high-frequencies. It's encoded at constant bitrates above 1.509 Mbps.



DTS-HD High Resolution Audio

DTS-HD High Resolution is an optional surround sound format for Blu-ray, and an alternative to DTS-HD Master Audio where disc space is short. It's encoded at constant bitrates above 1.509 Mbps and up to 6.0 Mbps for Blu-ray.



DTS-HD Master Audio

Capable of delivering more than 7.1 channels, DTS-HD Master Audio is bit-for-bit identical to the studio master. It's encoded at variable bitrates above 1.509 Mbps, and up to 24.5 Mbps for Blu-ray. It can also downmix to 5.1 and two-channel.



Onkyo TX-NR807

Winner: Best AV Receiver/Amplifier under £1,000
First Reviewed: HCC #176

Onkyo has recently cemented its domination over the AV receiver market by providing astonishingly well-specified kit at attractive price points, and the 7.2-channel TX-NR807 is no exception. Costing £800, it features no fewer than six HDMI inputs, onboard video upscaling – to 1080p – and decoders for the extra front-channel processing formats Audyssey DSX and Dolby ProLogic IIz. Additionally, it can stream 'net radio stations via a direct connection, and music files from your home PC. Not to mention its bombastic audio abilities.



Also nominated...

Sony STR-DH800

First Reviewed: HCC #178

For the absolutely bargain price of £350, Sony has crammed a lot of home cinema technology into its STR-DH800, including all the HD audio decoders you need.



Yamaha RX-V2065

First Reviewed: HCC #179

Top-flight sonic performance is the order of the day for Yamaha's brilliant RX-V2065. This £850 AVR delivers a wonderful, natural soundscape with all movie flavours.





Onkyo TX-NR3007

Winner: Best AV Receiver/Amplifier £1,000-£2,000
First Reviewed: HCC #177



This high-end AVR packs so much tech it's a surprise that it doesn't bulge at the sides, including a 9.2 configuration at 200W per channel, Audyssey DSX and Dolby ProLogic IIz processing, and a HQV Reon VX processor for deftly upscaling video up to 1080p. There's also DLNA 1.5 streaming and compatibility with Windows 7. But it's the 3007's frighteningly realistic expertise with hi-res soundtracks that makes it worth every penny of its £1,700 ticket.

Also nominated...

Pioneer SC-LX82

First Reviewed: HCC #175

As sexy as it is capable, the ICE-powered £1,900 LX82 offers a punchy, highly detailed soundfield, THX Ultra2 Plus certification and sonic tuning by AIR studios.

Denon AVR-4310

First Reviewed: HCC #173

Denon's £1,900 4310 was the world's first DSX-capable AVR, and had us all moving our rear surround speakers to the front. The sound it creates is huge, potent and powerful.





Denon AVR-4810

Winner: Best AV Receiver/Amplifier over £2,000
First Reviewed: HCC #179

Denon's flagship AVR, costing £2,800, is a true behemoth in a world of mere monsters. Offering nine channels at 140W per channel (and capable of running an 11.3 system if you're mad enough) it certainly packs a punch – and it's more than capable of a decent kick in the nether regions, to boot. Add in the lengthy feature set (including six-in, two-out HDMI, integrated Wi-Fi, four-zone multiroom and direct hookup to Napster) and you have a home cinema component to be reckoned with.



Also nominated...

Arcam AVR600

First Reviewed: HCC #172

With aesthetics that set it apart from the AVR norm, the £3,500 AVR600 is a product of thousands of hours of love and attention from truly dedicated aural boffins.

AudioControl Concert AVR-1

First Reviewed: HCC #178

AudioControl's six-grand Concert AVR-1 is pure American muscle in every way possible. If bold and brash is your bag, this is the high-end receiver for you.

Onkyo TX-NR5007

First Reviewed: HCC #180

At the top of Onkyo's extensive AV receiver range towers the £2,200 TX-NR5007 – a feature-packed master of home cinema sonics, with excellent video upscaling



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TS 1201 Subwoofer

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Home theatre speakers, hi-fi speakers, custom Installation speakers, commercial speakers ...and now a new range of compact subwoofers.



Panasonic PT-AE4000

Winner: Best Projector £5,000 and under
First Reviewed: HCC #177

The latest in a long line of award-winning LCD projectors, the PT-AE4000 lists a new colour and contrast-boosting red-rich lamp amongst its many improvements. A host of enhanced picture processing features are also on offer, as are two 12V triggers for those with automated screens. And while Panasonic is focusing on the 'prosumer' with this home cinema-centric Full HD projector, its tasty price of £2,500 keeps it in the realms of affordability. Nice!



Also nominated...

Epson EH-TW5500

First Reviewed: HCC #181

Epson's £4K LCD projector matches no-nonsense design with well thought-out and meticulously-crafted features, resulting in a superb bigscreen proposition.

Optoma ThemeScene HD82

First Reviewed: HCC #173

Optoma's Full HD PJ hits the same price point as the Panasonic, yet utilises DLP technology rather than LCD. Its black levels are excellent, and colours are bold as brass.

Vivitek H1085

First Reviewed: HCC #179

Vivitek's £1K H1085 DLP projector offers considerable value-for-money, thanks to its Full HD 1080p resolution, 12V trigger, rich colours and ISF-calibration controls.





JVC DLA-HD950

Winner: Best Projector over £5,000
First Reviewed: HCC #179

JVC seems to outdo itself with each iteration of its D-ILA projection technology, with the latest chipset allowing for market-leading black levels and colour rendition. We found the £6,000 HD950 capable of offering truly astounding pictures, with a sense of depth not normally seen this side of £10K. It also boasts a set of calibration controls so varied and intuitive that they'll keep tweakers and perfectionists amused (rather than bemused) for days. To see one is to want one!

Also nominated...

projectiondesign avielo optix
 First Reviewed: HCC #170

Costing £23,000, the avielo optix is not going to suit everybody's budget, but it is a truly reference-grade three-chip DLP projector for those with the wonga to spend.

SIM2 Grand Cinema C3X 1080
 First Reviewed: HCC #169

Like the avielo, this beast costs a weighty £23,000, yet it boasts pictures to suit its pricey pomposity. Its video performance is similarly of a reference standard.

Sony VPL-VW85
 First Reviewed: HCC #174

At £5,400 Sony's SXRD projector is comparatively inexpensive amongst such heavyweights, but its pictures hold enough punch to satisfy the more budget-conscious.



56 AWARDS 2010

IN ASSOCIATION WITH
 **dts**
Digital Entertainment



Panasonic TX-P46Z1

Winner: Design Excellence Award
First Reviewed: HCC #172

Also nominated...

Cabasse iO2 System

First Reviewed: HCC #180

'The Martians are coming!' Actually, they're not, it's just the exquisite '50s B-movie looks of these extraordinary speakers.



Bowers & Wilkins Panorama

First Reviewed: HCC #172

Bowers & Wilkins never does things by halves, and when the company added a soundbar to its speaker line-up, it made sure that the end result embraced a high-end design aesthetic.



Technologically, the £4,300 Panasonic TX-P46Z1 is a force to be reckoned with.

With its high-performance NeoPDP panel and Wireless HD functionality it takes plasma TV to a new level. But it's the set's design sensibility which really wows. Built to impress, it can be considered the standard-bearer for the new wave of modernistic TV.

360° of perfection.

CARA by Denon



CARA by Denon: Blu-ray Disc/DVD-Surround-Receiver. // At Denon, we don't like compromises. And we know you don't, either. So when setting out to create a 360° solution for home entertainment, we integrated high-end components only: A top-of-the-range Blu-ray Disc drive mechanism, AL24 Processing, Compressed Audio Restorer, Audyssey Dynamic Volume and many more. Speaker flexibility, ease of use and connectivity? All in. And all hidden in a sleek design that graces any room. The result matches our idea of perfection. Does it match yours? Find out at your local dealer or at www.denon.co.uk



HIDDEN DOORS
Design that beautifies
connectivity.



LG NAS N2B1

Winner: Best AV NAS Product
First Reviewed: HCC #181

LG's debut home entertainment server takes the nascent NAS market in a whole new direction. The world's first NAS with an integrated Blu-ray drive, it allows you to archive off your media content onto high-capacity Blu-ray media. The fact that this £380 DLNA-compliant unit is also whisper quiet and easy to use makes it a great choice for anyone looking to expand their network AV entertainment. Forward thinking and truly impressive.



Also nominated...

Linksys by Cisco
NHM4010 Media Hub
 First Reviewed: HCC #172

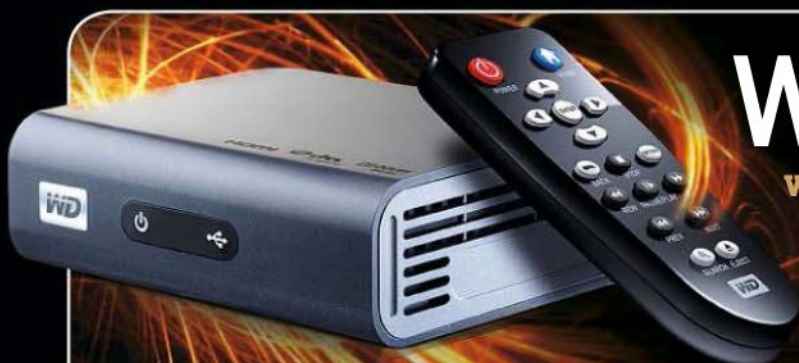
While servers are generally hidden away in a cupboard somewhere, the £350 NHM4010 looks good enough to be on display.



XIVA musicm8

First Reviewed: HCC #180

This £800 lovely combines a speedy CD ripper with a 1TB DLNA media server that also offers internet access wherever you happen to be.



WDTV Live

Winner: Best Media Streamer
First Reviewed: HCC #180

There are few media streamers that offer rock-solid compatibility with as wide a range of file types as the WDTV Live.

The first network-enabled version of Western Digital's streamer family, it combines an elegant user interface (with cover art browsing and video clip preview window) with plug and play simplicity. For just £120 it's an ideal way to deliver sound and vision into your living room system.



Also nominated...

A.C.Ryan PlayOn! HD
 First Reviewed: HCC #181

This brand is creating quite a splash with its PlayOn! Models. Extensive file support and local storage ability make this model well worth investigating. Priced from £135.



HD Digitech HDX-1000
 First Reviewed: HCC #176

Move over Popcorn Hour. With a heavy-grade chassis, the £190 HDX-1000 is the best-built of all the streamer/NAS devices based on Syabas' acclaimed NMT middleware.



Iomega ScreenPlay Director HD
 First Reviewed: HCC #181

Costing £170, the ScreenPlay Director HD can play a healthy array of file types both locally and remotely. And it has space to fit an HDD of up to 2TB in storage size.



Panasonic DMR-BS850

Winner: Best Digital Recorder
First Reviewed: HCC #170



Also nominated...

Sagem DTR67500T

First Reviewed: HCC #173

Sporting a 500GB HDD and 1080p upscaling via HDMI, this £180 Freeview PVR is a cut above the norm. It even lets you dub recordings onto an external storage device.



Virgin Media V+ HD

First Reviewed: HCC #170

The new Samsung edition of Virgin Media's V+ HD PVR (£49, plus subscription) is quieter, faster and all-round funkier than the standard version it's replacing.



A hefty price tag – £1,000 on launch – was not enough to dull our enthusiasm for Panasonic's first Blu-ray recorder. Its 500GB hard drive and twin Freesat tuners let you store plenty of hi-def programming, but it's the ability to then dub the whole lot onto a Blu-ray disc that really sets this recorder apart from the crowd. And this year Panasonic is expanding its range of BD recorders to offer two models featuring Freeview HD tuners, so you won't need a dish to join in all the HD dubbing fun!

Danny Tack

Winner: Hall of Fame



As Technical Director of Philips, Danny Tack has been a driving force behind many of the company's breakthroughs and unique television concepts since 1981, including the groundbreaking Cinema 21:9 TV and Philips' Ambilight technology. He's also the mastermind behind Philips' advanced picture processing codes. Welcome to our Hall of Fame, Mr Tack! We salute you!



ImagineThis

Winner: Installer of the Year
Featured in: HCC #172



Part of a whole-house integration project, this cinema room created by ImagineThis combines a stunning design with state-of-the-art hardware. The kit rack reads like a who's who of home entertainment, with flagship products from the likes of Denon, Runco, Triad, Crestron and Kaleidescape, but it's the finishing touches that really impress – including cinema seats fitted with tactile transducers and smart-control lighting. An outstanding example of CI excellence!

Also nominated...

DSE Digital

Featured in: HCC #171

DSE Digital converted a formal dining room into this hi-tech seven-seat theatre system. And face it, you'd happily eat your dinner off the floor in exchange for a cinema of this quality.



Finite Solutions

Featured in: HCC #178

This mega makeover by last year's winners Finite Solutions not only features a premium-grade cinema setup, but packs in a games room and fully-stocked bar, too.



Maven AV

Featured in: HCC #172

This install by Maven AV is an excellent example of what can be accomplished in a modest-sized room – 7.2-channel Full HD bigscreen thrills with sophisticated control. Neat.



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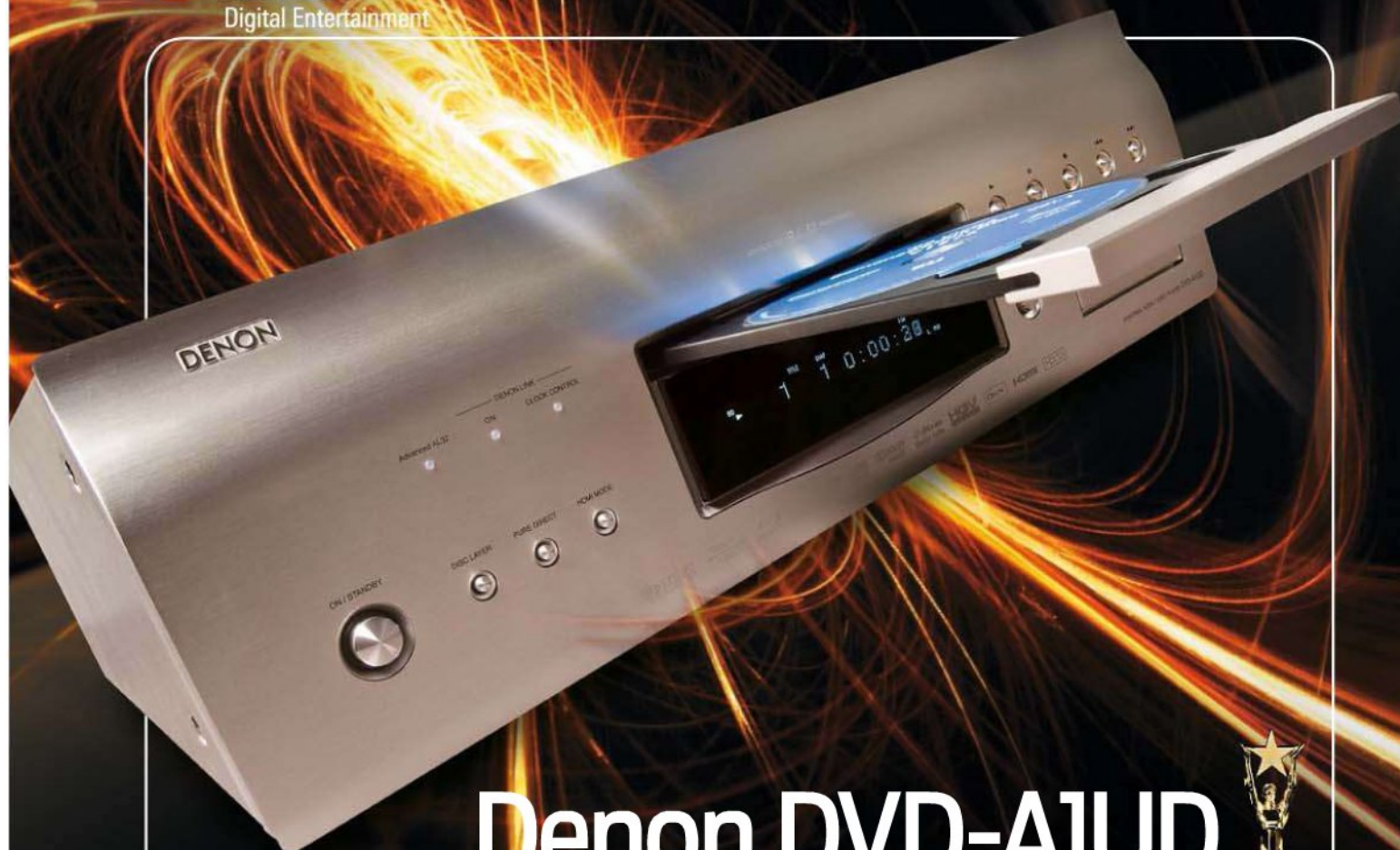


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Denon DVD-A1UD

Winner: Special Reference Status Award
First Reviewed: HCC #178



More than just a Blu-ray player, the DVD-A1UD is as comfortable with Super Audio CDs and DVD-Audio discs as it is with the latest BD platter. Its reference-grade audio performance is suitably partnered with stunning visuals, including some of the best upscaled standard-definition pictures ever seen, and the build-quality is not just for show – its stability improves every aspect. Even at £4,500, the A1UD is so good that an *HCC* staffer has now bought one!

Also nominated...

Paradigm Reference Signature
 First Reviewed: HCC #174

Featuring beautiful aesthetics and gloriously defined high-end sound, the Paradigm Reference Signature 7.1 speaker package justifies every penny of the system's £19,500 price tag.

Arcam FMJ AV888/P777
 First Reviewed: HCC #177

Together this pre-power amplifier combo costs £8,000, but for that you get as close to professional movie sound as possible. It's also a double-act to suit hi-fi audiophiles.

Anthem Statement D2v, P2 & P5

First Reviewed: HCC #170

Unfeasibly huge and painfully loud, this £20,000 Canadian import trades meat and muscle for subtlety to class-leading effect. Growl!



Up

Winner: Disc of the Year
First Reviewed: HCC #179

Disney and Pixar have become known for quality Blu-ray releases that deliver everything the hi-def format promises, and *Up* is no exception, touching down on BD with a pixel-perfect 1080p encode, a delightfully playful DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 mix and a generous collection of extras.

Also nominated...**Gone With the Wind**

First Reviewed: HCC #176

The 71-year-old Hollywood legend benefits from a spectacular 8K facelift and a plethora of extras for its first foray into the world of Blu-ray. Frankly, it's brilliant.

Fight Club

First Reviewed: HCC #176

David Fincher's cult thriller packs a real punch in hi-def, thanks in large part to one of the most imaginative lossless audio mixes you'll ever encounter.

Star Trek

First Reviewed: HCC #177

From its vibrant and detailed 1080p visuals to the reference-quality Dolby TrueHD 5.1 mix and encyclopaedic array of extras, this sci-fi smash is a must-have on Blu-ray.





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REVIEWS

→ **Hardware highlights** ONKYO THX Ultra2-certified amp, processor and Blu-ray spinner **SHARP** LED TV with brand-new yellow pixel power **PANASONIC** 50in plasma with twin HD tuners **TEUFEL** Affordable 5.1 speaker system **IOMEGA** Home entertainment server **GRUNDIG** 500GB Freesat+ PVR **GROUPTEST** Four soundbars go head-to-head **AND MUCH MORE!**

Lens flair

The new projector from InFocus is styled to kill – but how does its performance measure up? See p86



HCC Ratings key

Outstanding	1 2 3 4 5
Above average	1 2 3 4 5
Acceptable	1 2 3 4 5
Disappointing	1 2 3 4 5
Dire	1 2 3 4 5

HCC DOESN'T BELIEVE IN OVER-PRAISING HARDWARE. CONSEQUENTLY, A THREE-STAR RATING SHOULDN'T BE CONSIDERED A BAD RESULT – IT SIMPLY MEANS THAT A PRODUCT PERFORMS ACCORDING TO ITS CATEGORY POSITION. A FIVE-STAR RATING IS ONLY AWARDED IN EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES



Separating amplification
(bottom) from processing (middle)
should bring sonic benefits

Thunderous THX threesome

Imposing and unapologetic, Onkyo's THX-blessed trio is a cinephile dream system. **Steve May** wallows in its god-like power



Of all the badges, on all the fascias, in all the world, THX remains a branding guaranteed to bring on anticipatory goosebumps. For me, the acronym is synonymous with home cinema excitement, and I still get chills when I hear the classic THX theme (played at the right reference level, of course).

In the spirit of full disclosure, I should reveal that this is probably because I was indoctrinated into the cult of THX early on, having been trained at Skywalker Ranch, earning my official THX installer certificate and getting a copy of the legendary *THX WOW! Laserdisc* in the process.

Obviously THX has changed much since then (not least in departing the aegis of Camp Skywalker), evolving dramatically with the arrival of Chief Scientist Laurie Hall in 1999, but I still largely subscribe to its tenets and appreciate using THX modes, even though I haven't owned a pair of THX-certified speakers in years.

While THX continues as a badge of honour on components at the higher end of the AVR market, it remains relatively unusual to see a full-on pre-power-component system built around the stamp. But that is exactly what we have here.

The beating heart of this system is the £1,800 PA-MC5500 power amp. Onkyo has offered AV processors for a couple of years, but been strangely slow to release a matching power amp. This is the reason. First seen snarling in a cage at the 2009 IFA tech fest, the MC5500 is 26kg of godlike fury. With nine channels of

amplification and THX Ultra2 certification, you know without even powering it up, it will smite like the hammer of Thor.

The arguments for and against using separate pre/pro components are as old as Norse legends, and the debate hasn't changed much of late. The logic of the 'for' camp is undeniable. **By separating transformer and amplification from digital electronics you're removing any possible contamination or influence upon audio and video signals.** Taking such a pure approach also has an engaging simplicity that many find appealing, and usually comes with a promise of superior brawn – always convincing in a hardcore AV environment. Against pre/power combos, of course, are issues of space and convenience. A fully-integrated AVR solution is just more manageable – and few would argue that compromise arguments are significant at the well-resourced end of the AVR market.

While some of Onkyo's competitors have pursued digital amp solutions, the PA-MC5500 is entirely, classically analogue.

Hooking it up to its matching SC5507 processor is straightforward. The back panel offers balanced gold-plated XLRs (the interconnect of choice for audiophiles), brass phonos by way of alternative (this was how I auditioned the system), and requisite banana plugs. The

AV/CV

Product: THX-certified pre/power combination with matching Blu-ray player

Positioning: Onkyo's flagship system package

Peers: Pioneer SC-LX90 AVR; Rotel RSP-1570/RMB-1575; Arcam AV888/P777

power output of each identical amp module is rated at a not inconsiderable 220W (into 6Ωs) by the manufacturer. In our Tech Labs, we measured 160W into 8Ωs with two channels driven, but this drops to 120W with five channels driven and 110W with seven. It's worth noting that it's not particularly green, sucking 2,000W with seven channels on the go, dropping to 145W when idling.

As the THX certification will attest, this means there's enough power on tap to deliver reference level audio to a screening-room sized cinema. That translates in my listening room to enough energy to imperil the fixings of the drop-down screen, and rattle the air-con. I really don't recommend unleashing upwards of a kilowatt of power in a confined space – unless you're seriously deranged and/or watching *300* for the umpteenth time (one movie where you just have to play it louder with each spin. It's the rules).

The hi-fi avenger

Traditionally, I've found cheaper Onkyo AVRs to occasionally skimp on build quality (maybe one reason why they're often so darn affordable). But that's not the case with the MC5500. A steel chassis encases the unit-wide heatsink and ominous toroidal power transformer, resulting in a significantly hefty and well-built unit.

The MC5500 has been designed from the ground up to work with the £1,800 PR-SC5507 processor. Built into an AVR chassis, it ticks most of the boxes a demanding AVphile

70 REVIEWS

requires. It would be churlish to criticise a feature slate that leaves little to the imagination (so I won't), but it could be argued that at times it just doesn't go far enough.

For example, the SC5507 is only a partially-enabled DLNA network entertainment hub. Pedantically, this DLNA DMR (Digital Media Renderer) doesn't allow you to stream any form of video across your network, although it will access Music Shares on compliant servers. I hooked it up to my network and it immediately found my shambolic collection of NAS boxes and PCs. The presentation of this network content is basic; you can browse music via standard artist/album/genre/etc tabs in a list format, but there is no support for cover art. This is one area I hope Onkyo develops in future. File support is good, covering MP3, WMA, WAV, FLAC, Ogg Vorbis, AACs and LPCM. You can also access 'net radio stations via vTuner, or, if you're a subscriber, LastFM.

There's a Music Optimizer mode (as well as some 'Neural' post processing) for compressed music, to eke the greatest clarity from files or streams. However, control over this portion of the system is clunky. The remote's logic is such that you need to engage the Net/USB button to

On balance:
For the best-sounding results, connect the PR-SC5507 to the PA-MC5500 amp via its XLR outputs

browse and play connected sources. However, if you toggle back to Receiver control on the remote, because, say, you want to engage a particular type of DSP processing, you lose Play/Stop transport control of the file. To regain this you need to hit Net/USB, which in turn stops any streaming music you may be listening to. There is a workaround, but it's too convoluted to bother with. Not particularly user friendly.

All bases covered

Connectivity is luxurious. There are seven HDMI v1.3 inputs, plus three component video inputs (which will steal from your HDMI selection options) and six legacy composite/S-video inputs. Digital audio inputs consist of three optical and three coaxial. Conveniently, there are two HDMI outputs, allowing you to feed both a monitor and projector. Video processing is par for the up-market course. The processor will upscale all sources to 1080p over HDMI, courtesy of an HQV Reon-VX chip, and take analogue to 1080i where possible. Plus there's ISF video calibration, to optimise each video source on a per input basis, before sending the video signal to a display.

Root around under the front fascia flap and you'll find a USB port for

portable media players and flash drives, another HDMI and AV grouped input, and an unusual addition to the back of this box is Onkyo's new Universal Port. This is a daisy-chain interface that allows various modules to be cabled into the system with a single interconnect (no additional power supply required). Onkyo offers a DAB+ tuner (£130) and iPod dock (£150) although I didn't have these for testing. The unit also has an onboard FM tuner. Frankly, the latter is of zero interest to me, I never use them in AVRs (and I suspect I'm not alone).

A 12V trigger is used to tether the power amp to the processor. For further component control, two additional triggers are available if you need them.

Beneath the hood are Burr-Brown 192kHz/32bit DACs on all channels and audio decoding is predictably comprehensive, with all flavours of DTS and Dolby supported. There's also the Audyssey DSX processing suite onboard, for a front wide/front high speaker configuration, along with Dolby Pro-Logic IIz height processing. HCC's Richard Stevenson is a convert to front wide (which gives a forward-facing spread of five channels), but I'm more of a traditionalist. My preferred setup



is classic 7.1. This system lets you adopt/experiment with both.

In keeping with the PR-SC5507's pure design ethic, there are separate power supplies for audio and video processing. While the processor lacks any implementation of the kind of next-gen HDMI reclocking we've seen from rival brands, it does sport low-jitter PLL (Phase Locked Loop) circuitry and high-quality silicon in the form of a trio of Texas Instruments Aureus 32bit chips assigned to handle DSP processing.

I would imagine that custom installers will appreciate the PR-SC5507's multizone capabilities, although they're largely lost on your humble reviewer (my idea of multiroom audio is to turn up the volume). Zone Two can have stereo audio, with video and subwoofer feeds. Zone Three can run stereo audio with a sub.

RoomEQ

Once installed, I immediately ran the Audyssey MultEQ room balancer. This is one of the better auto room balancing systems available, and it did a reasonably good job in my listening room. However, there are times when you might want to listen to particular sources without Audyssey balance, but with your own

preferred setup. In this case, one might expect to be able to save your settings to a bank of memories, which isn't the case here. If you toggle Audyssey off, you then have to manually reset all of the speaker balances.

The final component in this system is the £600 BD-SP807 Blu-ray deck. As with the processor and power amp, it comes THX-certified, making it the first-such Blu-ray player in the UK. My initial impressions of this deck are positive. It's a battleship grade BD-spinner that doesn't undersell itself when it comes to high-quality components. Beneath the lid is an Analog Devices 297MHz/12bit video DAC of some quality, while a 10bit Anchor Bay ABT1030 Video Reference Series chip upscales standard-def DVDs. For superior audio performance there are 192kHz/24bit DACs. Unused in this configuration are seven analogue audio outputs.

However, despite the creds, it's ultimately the least convincing component in the system. While I know and appreciate the various THX post-processing modes employed by the processor, I struggle to identify what the certification brings to this deck. It looks lovely, and the fascia and chassis is admirable. However, the wobbly tray ejects with a curious rasp, and doesn't convince me this is premium kit. Disc-loading is hardly snappy, at 83 seconds for our standard BD test disc; audio jitter measurements are good but not outstanding at 451ps. All video measurements can be considered excellent, however, and indicate superior circuitry and processing.

The harsh fact is that Blu-ray players are being evolved at such a rate by the mainstream brands that hi-fi specialists like Onkyo have little hope of keeping up. **This may be a Profile 2.0 player, but the Ethernet connectivity is reserved purely for BD-Live.**

There's no network functionality available, and certainly no access to online content portals. The best you get is an SD card slot for easy playback of music, movies and JPEGs. Video file support includes DivX HD, AVI, regular DivX and AVCHD. Of course, if you want a full-blown THX system this fits the bill. I have no quibbles with its performance, video and audio quality are undeniably good. It's just the feature set which underwhelms.

→ Specifications

PR-SC5507 processor

Dolby True HD: YES with Dolby Pro-Logic IIz, Dolby Volume
DTS HD Master Audio: YES
THX: YES Ultra2 Plus
Multichannel pre-out: YES 9.2 channel balanced XLR
Multichannel input: YES 7.1 phono
Multiroom: YES main plus 2 zones
AV inputs: YES 4 x S-video, 5 x phono audio, 7 x digital audio (3 x coaxial, 4 x optical)
HDMI input/output: YES 8-in, 2-out
Video upscaling: YES to 1080p
Component: YES 3-in, 1-out
Dimensions: 435(w) x 199(h) x 454(d)mm
Weight: 14kg
Features: Audyssey DSX/Dynamic Volume/Dynamic EQ; 3 x 12V triggers; Ethernet; 2 x USB; RS232 port; Audyssey MultEQ XT; internet radio (Last.fm and vTuner); ISF video calibration; Ultra-Low-Jitter PLL (Phase Locked Loop) circuitry; HQV Reon-VX processor; DLNA and Windows 7 certified networking; Universal port; FM/AM tuner; DSD Direct for SACD; S-XGA-capable PC input

PA-MC5500 power amp

Power: 9 x 220W
Inputs: 9 x analogue phono; 9 x balanced XLR
Dimensions: 435(w) x 199(h) x 458(d)mm
Weight: 23kg

BD-SP807 Blu-ray player

Upscaling: YES All resolutions up to 1080p24
Multiregion: NO Region B Blu-ray and R2 DVD
HDMI: YES Version 1.3
Component: YES 1 output
Multichannel analogue: YES 7.1 phono outputs
Digital audio: YES Optical and coaxial outputs
SACD/DVD-A: NO/NO Neither supported
Dolby True HD/DTS HD decoding: YES/YES
Dolby True HD/DTS HD bitstream: YES/YES
Profile 2.0: YES BD-Live
Dimensions: 430(w) x 55(h) x 249(d)mm
Weight: 2.6kg
Also featuring: SD card slot; Ethernet port; DivX HD, JPEG, MP3 & AVCHD playback; THX certified; Anchor Bay video processor; Sharpness, Contrast, Brightness, Gamma Correction, Color, and Noise Reduction video presets



A little word of THX

HCC spoke to **Warren Mansfield**, Director of Consumer Technology at THX, about its work with Onkyo on its Ultra2-certified processor

What does THX Ultra2 bring to the Onkyo PR-SC5507?

THX injects its knowledge of filmmaking, post-production and CE product design into every pre-amp, and the Onkyo is the latest in a long list of Ultra2 processors. This encompasses three key areas of the product's development: standards for product design; THX features and THX listening modes; and testing and quality control prior to mass production. We work closely with Onkyo during product development, ensuring the pre-amp is meticulously mapped to THX design standards. Then we perform more than 2,000 bench tests, including analysis of noise, distortion, frequency response, video switching and bass management, as well as compatibility with other AV components. The result is a pre-amp that can hit the highest benchmarks for quality right out of the box.

How does that translate into end-user benefits?

The Onkyo PR-SC5507 includes a number of THX listening features designed to let you experience movie soundtracks just like they were made by the filmmaker in the studio. Of course, the most noticeable benefit to consumers is consistent, predictable performance. When the volume is cranked up you will experience big bass, clear dialogue and accurate balance without hiss from the speakers, crosstalk between channels, hum from the mains or any other distortion.

What size room/viewing distance is Ultra2 perfect for?

The real difference between the THX Ultra2 Plus and Select2 Plus certification is power output. Each

THX certification category provides the necessary power to fill specific room sizes with peak Reference Level performance with low distortion. THX Ultra2-certified AV receivers and speakers are designed for large home theatres 3,000 cubic feet (about 85 cubic metres – or a room approx 5m x 6.5m x 2.7m high) in size. This equals a viewing distance of about 12 feet from the TV or projection screen to the primary seating position.

What is Reference Level?

Reference Level is the movie industry SPL setting (85dB with 20dB of headroom) used by sound designers. Every movie is mixed to this level in the studio. THX-certified receivers recreate this same SPL setting at the '0' position on the volume dial. When you are watching a movie with the playback volume set to '0' on your new Onkyo PR-SC5507, you will experience every sound element exactly like it was produced by the filmmaker – with the same SPL, fidelity, detail and clarity.

Cool, but what about my neighbours? I may need to turn it down a bit.

Yes, there is a downside to watching all of your favourite Blu-ray discs at Reference Level – it's often too loud

for your neighbours! But, when you lower the volume level, bass sounds, surround effects and other sound elements can be lost or perceived differently. To correct this, THX recently introduced a technology called THX Loudness Plus, which automatically adjusts the front-to-back speaker balance and frequency response as the volume is lowered. This lets you experience the rich details of a movie or game soundtrack without driving your neighbours or family crazy.

Are THX-certified speakers and THX subwoofer essential?

THX-certified speakers and subwoofers let you get the most out of your home cinema experience. With THX-certified components, you are always ensured a level of consistent performance regardless of brand or price point. Plus, THX-certified pre-amps and AVRs and speakers have a single, standardized bass configuration. This lets you easily configure your system with the push of a button. If you don't have the money to buy THX-certified speakers, the Onkyo PRSC5507 will work well with non-THX speaker brands as well. But, we would urge you to consider a THX-certified speaker package when funds allow.



Warren Mansfield says THX conducted over 2,000 bench tests on the Onkyo PR-SC5507



Onkyo's THX-certified amplifier, processor and player



Video star:
Onkyo's BD-SP807 is the UK's first THX-certified Blu-ray player

As the BD player is not compatible with Super Audio CD or DVD-Audio, I reverted to an Oppo universal deck for some of my auditioning. This allowed me to listen to the SACD release of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (30th Anniversary Edition), which has a memorable 5.1 mix from Alan Parsons. As *On the Run* segues into *Time*, the Onkyo pre/power combo effortlessly engulfed me with deranged laughter and projected footsteps, before wrapping a 360° drape of ticking, chiming timepieces around my head. I had to take some central bass bloom from the Audyssey EQ'd balance (after all, this disc has a very bassy mix), but the resulting wall of sound was considerable. Bowie's *Heathen* (another must-have 5.1 Super Audio CD), was delivered with astonishing clarity. Shut your eyes, and the imaging is razor-sharp.

I must confess to really liking a fair few of the DSP modes offered by the processor. The Onkyo-specific treatments are fine (Orchestra, Unplugged, Studio-Mix, All-Channel Stereo) and the THX/Dolby/DTS options comprehensive. THX Surround EX (with Re-EQ Off) is superb with the Dolby Digital 5.1 from Sky. The science-fiction drama *Caprica* uses a lot of surround steerage, particularly for sequences set in its virtual V-World, and these were sublimely placed by the Onkyo. While some receivers might simply pop FX into the back channel with all the subtlety of a rampaging elephant, the Onkyo smoothed them to create a convincing halo of surround audio.

With lossless formats from Blu-ray, the combination of monstrous power reserves and definition is beguiling.

Of course, you might expect a system like this to be lauded for its

home cinema prowess but rounded on for its musicality. I'd refute this. The Onkyo system seems to be equally at home with any hi-res audio – be it music or movies.

Ole Bull – Violin Concertos is the latest Blu-ray audio release from 2L, the Norwegian hi-res audio label. This platter contains a selection of gorgeous recordings of the working of the violinist known as the 'Scandinavian Paganini' in breathtaking detail, and you can choose to listen in 5.1 DTS-HD MA 24bit/192kHz, 7.1 DTS-HD MA 24/96kHz and stereo LPCM 24/192kHz. The imaging and delicacy delivered by the Onkyo pre/pro is peerless.

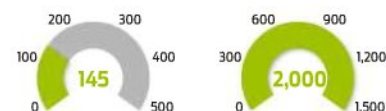
In a different vein, but equally enjoyable, is a FLAC recording of *Hells Bells* by AC/DC at 926kbps 16bit/44.1kHz. The stomping rock riffs ripple air.

High value, high-end

For a high-end audio proposition, the PR-SC5500/PA-MC5500 is surprisingly affordable. This pre/power combo typically sells for less than £4,000, and that strikes me as a bit of a bargain. Price-wise, it's comparable with the upper end of the integrated market, but in terms of performance, this THX Ultra2 duo will give most one-box solutions a spanking. The tonality of the power amp in particular is wonderful; It's like being hit with a velvet hammer.

The BD-SP807 Blu-ray player is understandably less compelling. It does what it needs to do rather well, and naturally, it's a great system match for the pre/power, but with rivals offering heaps of extras, from 3D Blu-ray compatibility to online connected content, it has its work cut out. Still, this shouldn't diminish what is a terrifically entertaining package ●

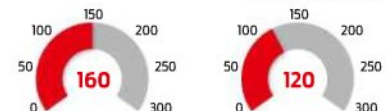
Power consumption: Watts PA-MC5500/PR-SC5507



Idling: In other words, turn 'em off when they're not needed

Powered: Seven channels driven uses 2KW of juice.

Power ratings: Watts (8Ω, 0.1% THD) PA-MC5500

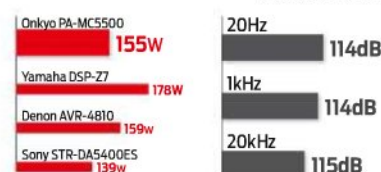


2-channel 8Ω: Not quite up to the manufacturer's spec, but still a meaty sonic performance

5-channel 8Ω: With Onkyo claiming 200W per-channel into 6Ω, this is respectable muscle

Untainted: Watts

Signal/noise: dB PA-MC5500

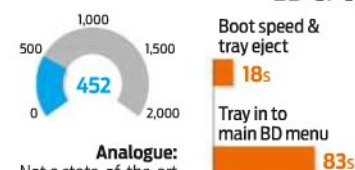


Fidelity firewall: 155W with 0.05 THD (two channels into 8Ω) delivers distortion-free performance up to very high volumes

S/N tests: We recorded excellent ratings at all frequency bands from this Onkyo system

Audio Jitter: Ps

Loading: Boot/Java BD-SP807



Analogue: Not a state-of-the-art measurement for the BD player, but not a ghastly one either

Disc loading & Java: The THX player is quick to boot-up, but has average loading speeds

HCC VERDICT

Onkyo THX system
£4,200 Approx

Highs: Excellent audio codec support; extensive connectivity; massive power reserves; smooth AV performance

Lows: BD player lacks network streaming and content portal; sheer size and weight of the power amp may be a challenge for some

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

→ Specifications

HD Ready: YES Full HD resolution

3D Ready: NO

Tuner: YES Freeview HD

Component video: YES 1 input

HDMI: YES 4 x v1.3

PC input: YES VGA

Resolution: 1,920 x 1,080

Sound: 2 x 10W

Brightness: 450cd/m2

Contrast ratio: 'Mega'

Dimensions (off stand): 1,127(w) x

785(h) x 39(d)mm Weight: 30kg

Also features: X-Gen panel with

Quad Pixel technology; 100Hz;

USB 2.0; Eco picture; Dolby Digital

Plus; Brilliant Colour processing;

10bit signal processing; 100,000

hour panel life; Time Shift to

internal memory



Sharp's round-edged bezel design is certainly eye-catching



Sharp strikes gold with yellow

Jim Hill basks in a wide ocean of colour as Sharp adds a fourth sub pixel to the traditional RGB display. Is this the best Sharp LCD ever?



While all the other TV brands are getting carried away with the prospect of 3D Full HD, Sharp has started its own more subtle TV revolution by rediscovering the colour yellow. Forget everything you know about RGB displays and make way for the first RGBY panel. By adding a fourth sub-pixel, Sharp has achieved a wider colour gamut and an altogether yellower TV experience.

The LE821E TVs, along with the premium LE921E series, are the first fruit of the brand-new Japanese Sakai City plant that's just started turning out X-Gen panels featuring the brand's proprietary Quad Pixel technology. It's a remarkable facility and a huge investment for Sharp, so we can expect to hear a lot more about the Quad Pixel story.

Looks the part

This upper-end 46in model certainly looks every bit the premium screen, with a striking sheer glass front plate that fits flush with the stylishly rounded edges. It's an edge-lit LED design, tailored for those seeking a super-slim set.

At less than 4cm deep, thin-seekers won't be disappointed, although this is by no means the thinnest set around – and at 30kg, it's one of the heavier LCD TVs on the market. That's partly because the back panel is made not from plastic, but metal. This is a statement

product for Sharp, so no expense has been spared.

Sharp TVs aren't generally known for their wealth of additional features, but the LE821E is well-appointed. **Crucially, it has a Freeview HD tuner, so you can admire Full HD channels from the BBC and ITV out of the box** – local reception permitting.

The LE821E also offers a TimeShift function allowing you to record footage from the HD tuner. You can both pause live TV and record standard-definition, or up to half an hour of high-definition footage, using internal flash memory. It's an easy-to-use solution for anyone that can't be bothered with a dedicated PVR.

Sharp is one manufacturer not to offer any kind of online widgets or apps, but there is an Ethernet port for updating the set's firmware. The set is also DLNA compliant, so you can stream music and JPEGs across a network, and access music, JPEG and video (AVI, XviD, MKV) files from attached USB drives.

In short, this is an extremely well-made, sensibly appointed screen, made more interesting with the inclusion of the brand's new Quad Pixel technology.

The picture quality offers plenty of reasons to be cheerful, and a lot of that can be attributed to the extra sub-pixel. Image detail is outstanding, if not ruthless. Evenness

AV/CV

Product:
46in LED-lit LCD TV and the first Quad Pixel X-Gen panel

Positioning:
Towards the top of Sharp's TV hierarchy

Peers:
Philips 47PFL9664;
Samsung UE46C7000

can be an issue on LED edge-lit screens, but the Sharp performs well in this regard. One consequence of the yellow sub-pixel is the way it appears to let more light through, creating an even brighter screen than you had before. This also translates into an energy saving, which makes for an unexpected extra bonus.

The temptation, of course, is to focus purely on the screen's reproduction of yellow, but this misses the subtle improvements that the RGBY configuration gives. For example, the New York cabs featured in the Blu-ray release of *The Day After Tomorrow* have a nice buttery hue, while the weather remains convincingly overcast.

Gold in that gamut

One colour that's notoriously difficult to pull off convincingly with an LCD TV is gold. And it's gold that gains from this new panel. Gilded objects offer an attractive and realistic glint. HCC's Test Card, designed to be a torture test for all screens, features an intricately shadowed 'Starman' trophy and foil-clad champagne bottles. On lesser screens, these tend to take on a pale yellow hue, but on the Quad Pixel set they are beautifully realised.

Another theoretical benefit of Quad Pixel technology is the way it widens the set's colour gamut. However, as both broadcast and Blu-ray/DVD work within a confined colour space, don't expect to see

HCC Test card

HCC's test card has been designed to torture even the toughest screens...



A Golden boy

The HCC 'Starman' statuette is rarely correctly rendered, but on the Sharp LE821E its gold hues are beautifully reproduced

B Blackout

Gradations between mid-grey and black are limited. Adjustments merely shift the position of the 100 per cent black

C Extensive control

For enthusiastic tinkerers there is an advanced setup menu, which allows considerable control over picture elements

obvious benefits. Extended gamut sources such as AVCHD and some game material may gain. One thing that's noticeable on the Sharp screen is the absence of banding or unnatural colour blocking. Instead, you get smooth gradations.

This set also boasts excellent contrast, although it was apparent that the TV struggled to deliver smooth, correctly gradated greyscale. The display basically jumps from a mid-grey to black. This was revealed by the Test Card, although to be fair it's less noticeable with moving images.

The Sharp does offer plenty of fine-tuning opportunities, so it's just a case of rolling up your sleeves and sifting through the onscreen menus to get the best balance.

The GUI graphics are relatively easy to navigate and the dedicated 'eco' button on the remote seems like a good idea.

Video processing is up to speed, too. The so-called e-motion 100Hz

technology ensures a smooth picture during fast-flowing action and the opening credits of *The Day After Tomorrow* provide a good test of this. As the camera pans at high speed across the Antarctic landscape you all too often see judder.

The same video chip also handles upscaling duties, and the LE821E does an accurate job of tweaking standard-definition Freeview footage to the 1080p resolution of the 46in screen.

It still looks a lot softer than the real thing available on BBC HD and ITV 1 HD, but it's in a different league of video scaler from the cheap chips you find lurking in upscaling supermarket DVD players.

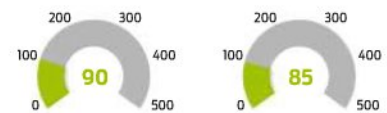
The sturdy metal and glass cabinet seems to benefit the TV's 2.1 speaker system, as it sounds richer and louder than your average telly. Realistically, though, I would strongly suggest that anyone considering this set will marry the excellent picture quality with a suitable home cinema system.

Boundary pusher

It's refreshing to find a company that's prepared to innovate this way. Sharp has taken its expertise in LCD and come up with a genuinely interesting evolution. But don't allow yourself to fixate purely on the Quad Pixel headline. This is probably the best LCD TV Sharp has released since the ultra high-end LC-52XS1E •

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



White screen:
An excellent result for a 46in set – the LED backlighting helps. Energy Save cuts consumption to 70W

Test footage:
The Sharp uses slightly less power when running a movie with full audio

TV Contrast: Ratio



Picture: We recorded a stupendous contrast ratio (although by default, black level is 'shifted' according to picture content) with luminance of 78.8fL

Colour accuracy



Presets: Even the Low colour temperature preset is some way off the 6,500K ideal; thankfully, individual RGBCMY adjustments are offered
Low: 7,100K
Mid-low: 8,760K
Middle: 9,960K
Mid-high: 10,840K
High: 11,800K



HCC VERDICT

Sharp LC-46LE821E
£2,000

Highs: Amazing levels of fine detail; great colour fidelity; useful Time Shift function

Lows: No video network streaming; not 3D-ready

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

HD Master Audio 6.1

Incredible Hulk
HD Master Audio 5.1

Illyboy II: The Golden Army
HD Master Audio 7.1

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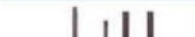
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- AVR4810 AV RECEIVER
- DBP1610 BLU-RAY PLAYER
- DBP2010 BLU-RAY PLAYER
- DF107DAB HI-FI SYSTEM
- DM37DAB HI-FI SYSTEM
- S5BD BLU-RAY RECEIVER

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- RXV765 AV RECEIVER
- RXV1065 AV RECEIVER
- RXV2065 AV RECEIVER
- RXV3900 AV RECEIVER
- DSPZ7 AV AMPLIFIER
- YSP4100 SOUND BAR
- PDX30 IPOD DOCK
- PDX50 IPOD DOCK
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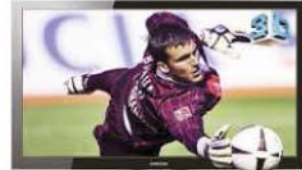
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SPEAKER PACKAGES

AMPLIFIERS & RECEIVERS

- DENON AVR1910
- DENON AVR2310
- DENON AVR3310
- DENON AVR4310
- DENON AVR4810
- SONY STRDH800
- YAMAHA RXV465BL
- YAMAHA RXV565BL
- YAMAHA RXV765BL
- YAMAHA RXV1065BL
- YAMAHA RXV2065BL
- YAMAHA RXV3900BL
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NEW

SAMSUNG

SERIES 7000

40 46 55

Introducing the first of Samsung's new 3D-ready HDTVs. The 40" UE40C7000 is an edge-lit LED-based model.

The 3D technology used on all Samsung's 3D TVs is the 'active shutter' variant (also known as alternate-frame sequencing), powered by RealD, which requires the use of '3D Active Glasses'. The technology works by first blocking the left and then the right lens to deliver alternating images to each eye to create the illusion of 3D depth.

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Next Generation TV



"This Samsung is one of the must-have TVs of the year so far. But even if you view 3D as a novelty, you should feel safe in the knowledge that the UE40C7000 is a fantastic set regardless"

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PANASONIC

PLASMA G20

42 46 50

This highly specified new range of Plasma TVs, available in three screen sizes, feature Panasonic's NeoPDP plasma panels for breathtaking performance - whether you are watching movies, sports or gaming.

Features include Freeview HD and Freesat HD tuners and a contrast ratio of 5,000,000:1 for extremely robust blacks.



NEW

TX-PS0VT20
Panasonic
3D TV
COMING SOON

PANASONIC

LED LCD D25

Panasonic introduces its new Viera LCD generation - it's called LED LCD and Panasonic is leading the way in delivering this next-generation of LCD TVs.

These ultra-slim TVs incorporate Panasonic's innovative technology which brings the moving picture quality of high-end LCD TVs as close as possible to perfection with a cleaner, sharper and more detailed picture free from artifacts.



NEW

32 37 42



PHILIPS

42PFL9664

This award-winning TV features built-in Wi-Fi web access, full HD, 200Hz motion smoothing and with a cutting edge 1ms response time. Native contrast is 80,000:1, although the new Ambilight Spectra 2 rear-projecting coloured LEDs are claimed to give a further 'perceived' improvement in contrast. And at only 49mm thick, the '9664 is easily wall-mountable.

46PFL9704

40PFL9704

56PFL9954H

DLP PROJECTORS

EPSON

EH-TW5500

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OPTOMA

HD20

HD82

These new full HD DLP projectors from Optoma combine great performance with outstanding value for money.

BLU-RAY DISC PLAYERS



PANASONIC

This new range includes the Full HD 3D capable DMP-BDT300 along with three conventional 2D players. All players blend comprehensive features, super-fast booting with superior sound and stunning HD-quality images.

DMP-BDT300

DMP-BD45

DMP-BD65

DMP-BD85

PIONEER

Get the most out of your movie experience with the luxuriously designed BDP-LX52. With a solid front aluminium panel, ice blue illumination and aluminium pre-set remote control, the player presents the best in both form and function.



BDP-320

BDP-LX52

DENON

Enjoy Blu-ray disc as it should be: Denon's range of players deliver high-end picture and sound quality.



DBP-1610

DBP-2010

DBP-4010UD

SONY

Experience movies like never before. These new Blu-ray disc players let you watch your favourite movie moments in true full high definition with superior high resolution surround sound and stunning 3D action on a 3D TV.



BDP-S570

BDP-S770

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HOME CINEMA AMPLIFIERS & RECEIVERS

DENON

Denon's A/V amplifiers and receivers continue to impress with the AVR-1910 being christened 'Product of the Year' and the AVR-2310 awarded best A/V receiver between £500 and £1000 by What Hi-Fi? Sound & Vision magazine. The numerous other five star reviews underlines the spectacular quality of the Denon range.

AVR-1910
AVR-2310

AVR-3310
AVR-4310



ONKYO

Featuring the latest HDMI 1.4 inputs for simple hook-up of all your high-def sources. This new 7.2-channel receiver brings compatibility with the new 3D video format, is THX-Select2 Plus certified and delivers 100 watts per channel. In addition to its Dolby ProLogic IIz height processing, it also includes Audyssey DSX height and width processing capabilities.

TX-SR608

YAMAHA

Yamaha A/V amplifiers and receivers are packed with features, offer excellent sound and represent outstanding value.

DSP-Z7
RX-V565

RX-V765
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PIONEER

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HOME CINEMA SPEAKER PACKAGES

MONITOR AUDIO

WHAT Hi-Fi? AWARD 2009
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Q ACOUSTICS

2000 CINEMA PACK

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RADIUS



B&W

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MINI THEATRE MT-25

MINI THEATRE MT-30

KEF



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KHT2005.3

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SPENDOR A5	CLAIM HMV VOUCHERS WORTH £150	£1,495	

SCREENS

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PANASONIC	TX-P50S10		£729
PHILIPS	42PFL9664		£ SSAV.COM
PHILIPS	47PFL9664		£ SSAV.COM

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PANASONIC	DMP-BD60		£119
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PANASONIC	DMP-BD80		£199
PANASONIC	DMR-EX733		£269
PIONEER	BDP-320		£199
PIONEER	BDP-LX52		£379
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KEF	KHT2005.3		£599
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Ready to rumble

Alvin Gold auditions a flexible 5.1 system with an imposing subwoofer

Teufel's Theater 200 system follows in the heritage of its Theatre 2 system, which first appeared in the mid-1990s and is described as 'legendary' by, er, the company's own website. So it has a lot to live up to.

It's a cute 5.1 system, which can easily be expanded to a 7.1, 9.1 or 11.1 package, if you want. Changes over the original Theater 2 speakers include new drivers and rare earth neodymium magnet technology, and an optimised design.

The front three speakers use what the maker describes as staggered tweeters (otherwise known as 'time aligned'), meaning they are set back from the main low-frequency drivers. Indeed, with the T 200 C centre cabinet, the tweeter is mounted in a housing on top of the main enclosure for all to see and touch, including inquisitive young children; the two T 200 F front speakers mount the tweeters on the baffle, set back from the plane of the main drivers. The effect is similar in the two cases,

which is that when heard at ear height in a normally adjusted system, the path is the same from the drivers in each speaker to the ear, giving a more focused and more consistent soundfield and better stereo imaging.

The T 100 D rear speakers work in a different way acoustically. Although the drive units seem related to those of the fronts, they're clearly different in detail, not least because they're not the same size. Also, there's no offsetting or time alignment of the tweeters. The surrounds can be used

Towering tweeter:

The centre channel's HF driver is positioned on top of the cabinet

AV/CV

Product:
Affordable 5.1 system with dipole rears

Position:
One of many sub/sat systems available from Teufel, but towards the low-end

Peers:
Monitor Audio Vector 5.1; Wharfedale Diamond 10 HCP



as dipoles, in which the front and rear sections work in anti-phase and give a more diffuse, larger scale sound, or, at the flick of a switch, the back-facing section can be switched off, leaving on just a single mid-range unit and tweeter for a traditional direct dispersion.

Advice about which radiation pattern to use, and how to set the speakers up is given by Teufel in its straightforward set up notes. That said, it fails to point out that there are so many variables in practical systems that 'suck it and see' is almost certainly the best advice.

The last part of the package, the T 2000 SW subwoofer, is a bruiser. It has an impressive 13in drive unit in a needlessly big enclosure. Such enclosures are physically hard to control structurally, and this one is far too lively, especially when the volume's high, or the low pass filter is set too high. I couldn't justify setting it anywhere other than its lowest setting, which indicates that it's not behaving as it should. The sub has all

the controls you need, but it can only be driven at line level. The enclosure is bass-reflex loaded, but while reflex ports often yield impressive LF extension, they tend to add noise and distortion when air is being squeezed in and out of it. Here, the sound's character changes with volume.

Bold and big

Despite some limitations, the Teufel Theater 200 turns out to be an impressive system, though it leans firmly in the direction of boldly-painted home cinema FX, and is much less convincing when used playing high-quality audio recordings in stereo, despite claims to the contrary from the brand. With *Cloverfield* (Blu-ray), it delivered an impressive, if not always the most subtle, soundfield. It's unusually good value, and the satellites are expertly fine-tuned. So, even while the subwoofer imposes some firm limits to system performance, at moderate volume the results are highly commendable ●

→ Specifications

T 200 F left/right speaker

Drive units: 1 x 6.5in cellulose fibre woofer; 1 x 1in dome tweeter
Enclosure: Direct radiating two-way
Frequency Response: 65Hz-20kHz
Power handling: 140W
Dimensions: 195(w) x 440(h) x 285(d)mm
Weight: 7.7kg

T 200 C centre speaker

Drive units: 1 x 6.5in cellulose fibre woofer; 1 x 1in dome tweeter
Enclosure: Two-way direct radiating
Frequency Response: 65Hz-20kHz
Power handling: 140W
Dimensions: 440(w) x 250(h) x 265(d)mm
Weight: 6.8kg

T 100 D rear/dipole speaker

Drive units: 2 x 6.5in cellulose fibre woofers; 2 x 1in dome tweeters
Enclosure: Two-way dipole, switchable to two-way direct radiating
Frequency Response: 100Hz-20kHz
Power handling: 150W
Dimensions: 163(w) x 260(h) x 214(d)mm
Weight: 5.1kg

T 2000 SW subwoofer

Driver: 1 x 13in cone driver
Enclosure: Vinyl print chipboard vented/bass reflex
Frequency Response: 28-180Hz
On board power: 250W
Dimensions: 380(w) x 600(h) x 485(d)mm
Weight: 25kg
Connections: Line-level phono inputs and outputs



HCC VERDICT

Teufel Theatre 200
 £800 Approx

Highs: Bold, well behaved satellites; great value for money

Lows: Lively enclosures, especially the subwoofer, which can sound boxy and coloured

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

AWARDS 2010 HOME CINEMA CHOICE

→ **Specifications**

HD Ready: YES up to 1080p24

3D Ready: NO

Digital TV tuner: YES Freesat HD, Freeview HD and analogue

HDMI: YES 4 x HDMI v1.3

Component: YES 1 input

PC input: YES 1 x 15-pin D-Sub

Sound: 2 x 10W

Resolution: 1,920 x 1,080

Brightness (claimed): N/A

Contrast ratio (claimed): 5,000,000:1

Dimensions (w/o stand) mm: 1,218 (w) x

769 (h) x 82 (d) mm

Weight: 26kg

Features: 600Hz subfield processing; 24p Smooth Film mode; light sensor with auto picture adjustment; Vivid colour mode; noise reduction processing; recording to registered HDD; latest NeoPDP technology; AVCHD/DivX/MPEG video playback; JPEG photo playback; MP3/AAC audio playback; Vreal Pro 5 processing

VIERA



HOME CINEMA CHOICE AWARDS 2010

Panasonic's G20 is the first TV to feature both Freesat HD and Freeview HD tuners

Carrying the plasma flag

The first set from Panasonic's new plasma range sets out to convince **John Archer** that it can compete with the latest LCD stars



With LCD TVs getting better and more popular almost by the week, the first of Panasonic's new (13th!) generation of plasma TVs, the TX-P50G20, arrives with a real weight of responsibility on its shoulders.

It's just as well, then, that the TX-P50G20 employs one of the brand's high-spec 'NeoPDP' plasma panels. Especially so, as Panasonic claims numerous improvements to NeoPDP since its debut last year, including a new filter, a new discharge gas, improved phosphors, and even a redesigned cell structure.

There's also been an incremental improvement to the video processing engine at the TX-P50G20's heart, in the shape of Vreal Pro 5. This engine sits alongside Panasonic's established 600Hz Sub-Field Drive, where the brand's Intelligent Frame Creation system inserts 12 extra 'sub-fields' for every real 50Hz image frame to create up to 600 sub-fields per second. It doesn't physically refresh 600 times a second, however.

Other promising features include an improved high contrast filter for reducing light reflections (and thus boosting contrast), improving colour purity and enhancing outline sharpness; a claimed 5,000,000:1 contrast ratio that more than doubles the figure quoted for last year's G10 series; and THX endorsement, complete with a THX picture preset.

As expected from a reasonably high-spec Panasonic TV, the

AV/CV

Product:
A 50in NeoPDP plasma TV with extensive multimedia functionality and Freesat/Freeview HD tuners

Position:
The G20 series sits below the VT20 range, and above the S20 and X20 models

Peers:
Sony KDL-46HX703;
Samsung UE-46B8000

TX-P50G20 carries a Freesat HD satellite tuner. But it also sports a Freeview HD tuner, to handle the new breed of hi-def broadcasts.

The TX-P50G20 has plenty of connections to explore, most notably four HDMI inputs, a LAN port, a D-Sub PC jack, two USB inputs and an SD card slot.

The LAN port lets you access content on a PC, go online with Panasonic's VieraCast service, or, eventually, enjoy Freesat interactive services like the BBC's iPlayer.

VieraCast remains similar to last year's offering, with YouTube, Eurosport, Bloomberg, DailyMotion and Picasa its biggest attractions. Other goodies, including Skype functionality and AceTrax video streaming, will come later in the year.

If the idea of hard-wiring the TX-P50G20 into your network doesn't appeal, you can go wi-fi via an optional USB dongle.

The SD/USB slots will play a wide variety of multimedia files formats, including JPEG stills, AVCHD/DivX/MPEG2 video, and MP3/AAC audio. Plus – get this! – **the TX-P50G20 lets you record TV to an external HDD.**

These recordings have notable strengths and weaknesses. On the plus side, the TV records direct digital broadcast streams, so recordings can be either HD or standard-def, and lose nothing in quality. You can also set the HDD to buffer video, for 'rewinding' live TV.

On the downside, you can't record to memory sticks; you need an HDD with a capacity of between 160GB and 2TB. You also can't record from the analogue tuner, or any external inputs. Finally, because of DRM concerns you have to register your HDD to your TV, with your recordings only playing on the TV the HDD is registered to. Grrr.

Please note, too, that the HDD has to be formatted before the TV can use it, so you can't share the HDD with other PC content.

The biggest limitation of the TX-P50G20's recording capabilities, though, appears to be the set's compatibility with different HDDs. I tried it with a slightly aging Buffalo HD-EU model, and a year-old Toshiba 250GB StorE drive. Neither worked. In fact, apparently the only hard drive Panasonic has formally tested with its TVs is the Buffalo JustStore Desktop HD-EU2-UK series. One of which I duly had to buy.

I'm not suggesting that only new Buffalo HDDs will work with the TX-P50G20, but, well, I suspect Panasonic's customer helpline should expect quite a few calls...

Taking on all comers

So, do the TX-P50G20's pictures throw down the gauntlet to this year's upcoming LCD upstarts? Actually, yes. For starters, notoriously tricky colours like rich reds, greens and skin tones look both more vibrant and more natural than they >



Rainbow warrior:
The colour performance of Panasonic's new plasma is vibrant yet natural

did on all but the most flagship (V10, Z1) models from Panasonic's 2009 range. Even better, this crucial improvement applies equally to standard- and hi-def sources, with much less of a discrepancy between the colour tones of the two resolutions than I saw last year.

I'm also impressed by the leap Panny has delivered with the TX-P50G20's standard-def images. The Resolution Enhancer circuitry really does sharpen things up, and, provided you avoid its max setting, it does so without generating distracting video noise.

Now, some of last year's Panasonic plasmas showed troubling greyness over dark picture areas, but on the TX-P50G20, **blacks really do look magnificently black** – especially as the screen is startlingly good at soaking up ambient reflections. Furthermore, because plasma is a pixel emissive technology, its deep blacks don't come at the expense of overall brightness, and accordingly contain lots of shadow detail.

Following on from this, I was also struck by the extra intensity and dynamism of the TX-P50G20's portrayal of dark scenes versus last year's equivalent models.

The screen's motion handling also improves on most previous Panasonic PDPs, as the Intelligent Frame Creation processing delivers enhanced fluidity without generating as many unwanted side effects. Even with IFC turned off the image seems less prone to judder.

Panasonic's talent for reproducing fine HD detail with its plasmas is again in evidence. In fact, the superior motion handling means that, overall, its HD pictures – including those from the HD tuners – actually look even sharper than they did on the brand's '09 screens.

With the TX-P50G20's pictures also shaming the LCD fraternity by retaining colour and contrast from wide viewing angles, I can only manage to rustle up a couple of small negatives about this 50in TV.

First, there's very occasional subtle fizzing noise over skin tones during rapid camera pans, especially with standard-definition material. Second, there's a little pixel instability with certain colour tones – but this is only noticeable if you sit far too close to the screen.

Nor is the TX-P50G20's audio as stellar as its pictures. There's no great bass or treble extension, leaving the action sounding rather condensed in an overcrowded mid-range. The soundstage isn't very wide, either. But at least the speakers never distort, and the audio is rarely harsh or tiring.

Worthy successor

There are things about this TV that I'd love to see Panasonic improve. It's still a bit plain aesthetically, it could sound better, and the USB HDD functionality is frustrating. But in the picture department it's truly outstanding, finally delivering a worthy mainstream successor to Pioneer's legendary Kuro sets ●

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



White screen:
Power consumption in normal mode is 330W. Power Save mode lowers it to 300W

Test Footage: Movie playback at full volume draws around 300W

TV Contrast: ratio



Picture: In Normal mode, the contrast ratio falls far short of the claimed figure at 7,700:1. Switch to Dynamic mode, though, and it measures no less than 84,500:1

Colour temp: Kelvin



Presets: CT presets are basic, and there are no manual tweaks available, certainly to the casual user. However, the THX mode (and warm CT preset) get close to 6,500K
Cool: 1,200K
Normal: 7,700K
Warm: 6,800K
THX: 6,800K



HCC VERDICT

Panasonic TX-P50G20
£1,500 Approx

Highs: Stunning pictures; value for money; built-in Freesat/Freeview HD tuners; excellent feature set

Lows: USB HDD recording comes with many strings attached; staid design

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

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→ Specifications

HD Ready: YES including 1080p24

3D Ready: NO

Component video: YES three inputs

HDMI: YES two v1.3 HDMI inputs

PC input: YES one D-Sub

12V trigger: YES three (lamp, two letterbox settings)

Resolution: 1,920 x 1,080

Brightness (claimed): 1,300 ANSI Lumens

Contrast ratio (claimed): 5,000:1

Dimensions: 362(w) x 178(h) x 540(d)mm

Weight: 7.6kg

Features: ISF support; motion interpolation processing; different skin colours available; ships with 2.5m HDMI; BrilliantColour processing; six-segment colour wheel; USB and RS-232 control options; 260W lamp; 10 manual iris settings; plus Auto mode; 2,500-hour quoted lamp life (eco mode)



InFocus has returned to the projector market with a whole new design philosophy



Projection resurrection

InFocus goes back to basics with its first new home cinema projector for nearly two years, leaving **John Archer** impressed



Having heard precisely zilch home cinema-wise since 2008 from the once-prolific projection brand InFocus, I'd begun to wonder if it had become another victim of the global recession. But rumours of its demise were evidently greatly exaggerated, for the company is back, with the ScreenPlay SP8602. The ScreenPlay name isn't actually new; InFocus used it first in 2004. But the SP8602's design is a total departure from InFocus projectors of the past, ditching the brand's previous predilection for curves and small footprints in favour of a large, elongated rectangular design with a predominantly matt black body, grille effect down the side and silver trim.

The SP8602's bulky shape gives you the impression that InFocus has opted for practical matters like optical quality and reducing cooling noise over shallow aesthetic concerns. That said, the InFocus SP8602 isn't devoid of frivolity. For instance, the backlit and strikingly simple remote control has actually been designed to look like a miniature version of the projector. I love it, though our Tech Labs aren't as impressed, bemoaning the fact that the menu button is sited next to standby.

Then there's the selection of interchangeable 'skins' InFocus does for the SP8602. You can swap the standard matt black top panel for white, gloss black and even walnut wood alternatives. Plus you can get a pre-primed skin onto which you can apply your own colour.

InFocus' frivolity spills over into foolishness, though, with the extraordinarily bright, neon blue circle of light that wraps around the lens in the SP8602's out-of-the-box state. Intended to give you an exceptionally obvious means of knowing when your projector is powering down or up, all you really notice is the blue pall the light ring casts over pictures until you turn the feature off. This is possibly the most bonkers flourish I've ever seen added to a projector.

Getting started

Setting up the SP8602 wasn't all plain sailing. For instance, while the projector does carry vertical and horizontal image shifting knobs (which you have to remove a panel to gain access to), these knobs elicit an imprecise and 'lightweight' response from the optics. A firmware upgrade released has now added additional horizontal and vertical shift controls to the advanced picture menu, giving you some extra digital control.

The SP8602's 1.5x optical zoom isn't as flexible as I'd have hoped from a mid-range projector, either.

AV/CV

Product: InFocus returns to the projection fray with a mid-range DLP model

Position: The SP8602 is currently the only product InFocus has confirmed for the UK

Peers: Optoma ThemeScene HD82; Epson EH-TW4400

Yes, there is a digital zoom feature on board, via which the projector digitally reduces the image for use in rooms with long throw distances, but home cinema purists are likely to run a mile from such a compromise.

The SP8602 is well-connected, though, with highlights of two HDMI, three component ports (which I'd actually happily trade two of for a third HDMI), three 12V trigger ports (which will definitely appeal to custom installers), and a Serial control bus.

The image flexibility delivered via the projector's onscreen menus is prodigious too

– so much so that the projector has been endorsed by the video boffins at the Imaging Science Foundation (ISF), and DIY tweekers will be over the moon. Adjustment highlights include red, green and blue gain and offset adjustments; a startlingly customisable noise reduction system; themed gamma presets, motion-smoothing processing; Texas Instruments' BrilliantColour feature; and the option to adjust the projector's iris across 10 manual settings, or to an Auto mode.

The Auto mode is a non-starter, since its effects on the picture are too strident. But the manual settings are certainly worth experimenting with if you have a darkened room; the 50-60 per cent level – with the



Blue meanie: When switched on, the lens ring glows blue. You'll want to deactivate this feature ASAP

lamp output set to low – worked best for me.

Impeccable HD

Although it takes a little experimentation to get there, the InFocus SP8602 really can produce excellent images for its three grand price tag, thanks in particular to their impeccable insight – especially with HD.

What do I mean by 'insight'? First, HD images look exceptionally sharp and detailed (provided you've got the NR processing and Overscanning off). Next, colours are rendered with mostly very natural tones and outstanding finesse, in that **there's no trace of the colour striping or skin tone blotching sometimes seen with DLP projection.**

Also helping you get the most from your hi-def sources is the SP8602's talent for producing impressive levels of shadow detail from dark image parts – something made possible by the fact that it has a more than respectable native contrast performance (claimed at 5,000:1, and measured at higher than that by our Tech Labs), so you don't have to take too much brightness out of pictures to achieve good black levels.

Additionally, the SP8602's pictures are relatively untroubled by those twin DLP issues of the rainbow effect and fizzing noise over motion. It handles motion generally very agreeably, in fact.

With InFocus' Motion Smoothing feature switched in, images look almost unnervingly smooth – though there's a little shimmering around the edges of moving objects. If this aggravates you, the SP8602's motion still looks good even with the Motion Smoothing technology turned off.

I found the only real blights on day-to-day enjoyment of the SP8602 are both 'mechanical' issues. Firstly, despite being markedly quieter than previous InFocus projectors, I still sometimes noticed the SP8602's rather high-pitched running noise, even when using the Eco lamp setting.

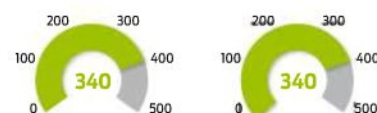
Secondly, the projector seems bizarrely clumsy at switching between input formats. If you swap from an HD to a non-HD channel on Sky, for instance, the SP8602 goes into meltdown, with all sorts of flickering screen and whirring fan shenanigans before the image finally appears.

Mid-range marvel

While I'm duty bound to acknowledge the InFocus SP8602's various foibles, the fact is that they only make up a relatively small part of your experience with this projector. In other words, once you've managed to get the SP8602 set up, the only thing you'll really notice for the vast majority of the time is a picture performance that's as good as anything the mid-range projector scene has ever produced ●

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



White screen: We measured 340W with our 100IRE screen; the lamp itself is claimed to be 260W in the specs

Test footage: The InFocus draws an identical amount of power with film as with our white screen

TV Contrast: Ratio



Picture: We obtained a contrast ratio of 5540:1 in full-brightness mode – an excellent real world result that exceeds the manufacturer's figure

Colour accuracy



Presets: The Warm preset is very close to the ideal 6,500K, however, gain and offset controls will allow you to tweak the colour temp to 6,500K.
Warmest: 6,400K
Warm: 7,500K
Cool: 9,000K
Bright: 7,600K



HCC VERDICT

InFocus ScreenPlay SP8602
 £3,000 Approx

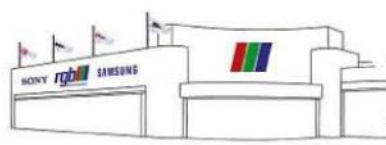
Highs: Excellent picture quality; good range of picture adjustments; different 'skins'; good remote
Lows: Not as flexible to set up as some; clunky input shifting; slightly noisy runner

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5



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Dish of the day

Martin Pipe tucks into Grundig's new 500GB twin-tuner Freesat+ DTR, and finds it pretty tasty

If you can't get decent Freeview reception in your area, and don't want to sign up to a PayTV operator like Sky, then Freesat is a viable alternative, especially as it offers the HD channels BBC HD and ITV 1 HD. Even better, the satellite that carries all its services is receivable everywhere in the UK, provided that the dish has an unblocked view.

Talking of which, any working satellite dish aimed at Astra 2x/Eurobird is your passport to Freesat HD. If you've got a Sky Digital dish – maybe one fitted by your home's previous occupier – then that will do. Having a new dish installed from scratch need not be expensive, either – prices begin at around £80.

Of course, you'll also need a Freesat-compatible set-top-box or DTR. And that's where this well-

specified black box from Grundig comes in.

The HD capable GUFSDTR500HD (what a ridiculous name...) is a twin-tuner DTR that complies with the Freesat+ specification. This can be loosely considered a satellite version of the Freeview+ DTR spec. Having said that, a key component of Freesat+ is the provision of two tuners (as found in Sky+, for example). This means you can watch one channel while recording another. In the Freeview+ world, such functionality is not mandatory.

Be aware, though, that you'll need a dual LNB on your dish to make the most of Freesat+ – Grundig gives you a single-LNB 'loopthrough' function, but this restricts the services that can be received simultaneously.

Other Freesat+ goodies will be familiar to Freeview+ users,

AV/CV

Product:
500GB
twin-tuner
Freesat+ box

Positioning:
Grundig's
top-of-the-
range Freesat
HD recorder

Peers:
Humax
FOXSAT-HDR

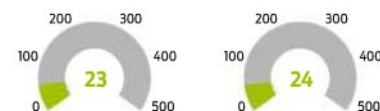
including the useful facility to pause and rewind live TV (which comes in handy more often than I'd thought); easy EPG-driven programme-selection and timer setting; a recordings library; a series recording link to ensure you never miss an episode of your favourite show again; and compensation for 'split' scheduling (handy for when your favourite movie is broken in half by ITV's *News at Ten*).

Built for HD The GUFSDTR500HD sports a generous 500GB of hard drive storage.

This is bigger than many DTRs on the market, but is necessary because it will be used to record HD material. You can squeeze approximately 125 hours of hi-def

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



Idling: 23W is par for the course. Both of the LNB feeds were used here, just as you would in a full domestic installation

Playing: Only slightly higher than in idling mode, and just slightly higher than an average Blu-ray player

→ Specifications

HDD/PVR: YES 500GB
DVB tuner: YES, twin Freesat HD
Upscaling: YES up to 1080i
HDMI: YES
Component output: NO
Phono output: NO
Digital audio output: YES coaxial and optical
Dimensions: 290(w) x 250(d) x 50(h)mm
Weight: 2.6kg
Also featuring: VCR (composite) and TV (RGB/composite) Scarts; Ethernet; USB; Freesat wizard-driven setup; 8-day EPG; series link; timer clash warning; live pause/rewind; preview/protect recording; simultaneously record/play; record one channel while viewing another; compatible with all Freesat services including digital teletext/subtitles/ audio descriptions



recordings on to the HDD, 312 hours of standard-definition, or a mixture of both.

All of the standard non-DTR Freesat features are available on the GUFSDTR500HD. Among these are support for subtitles and audio-described soundtracks, access to all Freesat TV and radio services and digital teletext. You also get a Ethernet port on the back of the unit, which the manual states is 'for 'future use'. The good news is that access to BBC's iPlayer catch-up service has already been activated.

Also on the rear panel is a USB port, which the manual tells us is for 'factory upgrades'. And, it would seem, nothing else besides. The Freesat+ specification can include the ability to play music (MP3) and photos (JPEG) transferred to the internal hard drive via USB, but this isn't covered by the GUFSDTR500HD. Plugging in a USB device laden with such content was ignored; it couldn't even be selected in the USB section of the menu. But that's a minor criticism.

Another downside is that the only analogue audio output is via Scart. Still, you're more likely to be interested in the digital audio outputs – both optical and coaxial – which are capable of piping 5.1 bitstreams to your AV gear.

Overall, the GUFSDTR500HD is a solidly-made product that works

Push the button: The Grundig's front-panel controls are straightforward

well. It's friendly to install, with a wizard taking you through the process. Day-to-day usage, in keeping with the Freesat 'house-style', is intuitive and responsive with acceptable channel-change waits. If you've ever used Sky+, you'll be pleased to learn that it's just as easy to schedule recordings with the GUFSDTR500HD direct from its eight-day EPG.

Pictures and sound are also impressive, especially from hi-def channels like BBC HD. Sound from decent-quality radio stations is superior to DAB, on account of the higher bitrates that tend to be employed. I found upscaled standard-def channels (to 1080i, but no higher) to be smooth and free of artifacts.

I also like the fact that the power supply is external (in theory, you could run the unit from any 12V DC source – even a car battery, should we end up in a *Mad Max*-style post-apocalyptic dystopia). This means the Grundig is cool running, boding well for reliability.

The space race

At £280, the GUFSDTR500HD is pricier than its direct competitor, the Humax FOXSAT-HDR, but offers 180GB more hard disk drive storage space. That may be enough to tip you in favour of Grundig's unit, especially if you're an HD TV junkie. Well worth investigating ●



HCC VERDICT

Grundig GUFSDTR500HD
 £280 Approx

Highs: Capacious 500GB HDD; Freesat+ certified; external power supply means it's cool-running
Lows: USB functionality currently disabled; looks a bit chunky in your kit rack

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

AWARDS 2010 HOME CINEMA CHOICE

Pint-sized power server

Small and well behaved, Iomega's new NAS is built for fun, says **Steve May**

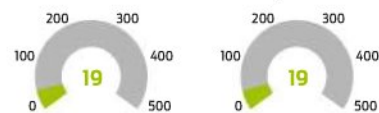


→ Specifications

Features: Compatible with Windows, Mac or Linux; RAID 1/ JBOD modes; supported Network File Protocols: CIFS/SMB/Rally (Microsoft); NFS (Linux/UNIX); AFP/Bonjour (Apple); FTP; HTTP; HTTPS; SNMP; Gigabit Ethernet connectivity with Jumbo frame support; iSCSI target; Remote Access via a personalised web address; one-touch copying via the QuikTransfer button; Print Server capability for up to three USB printers connected to the StorCenter ix2-200; UPnP/DLNA Certified Media Server; Torrent Download Manager (the StorCenter ix2-200 manages peer-to-peer file transfers without the need of a dedicated PC)
Dimensions: 162(w) x 165(d) x 231(h)mm
Weight: 5.2kg

→ Tech Labs

Power consumption: Watts



Idling: Power consumption is reasonable at 19W. The drives spin down when not in use (you set the Power-Down time from a menu).

Playing: There's no measurable power consumption difference when the device is streaming

AV/CV

Product: Low-profile entertainment NAS

Positioning: Iomega's flagship consumer server

Peers: Netgear ReadyNas NVX; LG L2B1

Iomega's second-gen NAS box, the StorCenter IX2, is a pocket-sized powerhouse for those looking to move their digital media off one (or more) PCs and onto a Share that can be accessed by the growing market of networkable AV kit – everything from TVs to dedicated streamers are now primed to work with NAS boxes.

The IX2 is a Minogue-like NAS, significantly smaller than rival boxes from Netgear and LG, with a beautiful curvy, brushed aluminium finish that matches the brand's external HDD range. Connectivity includes a trio of USB 2.0 slots and Giganet Ethernet port. The third USB slot is on the front, along side a Copy button. Hook up a USB stick or drive, and you can quickly dump the content to the NAS.

I estimate that it would take most users no longer than 20 minutes to get the IX2 up and running. Iomega's Installer disc provides a browser wizard which guides you through a short, painless setup routine.

Under the Media Services tab in the Web-ui are three icons: Media Server, Picture Transfer and Video Surveillance. The first is the UPnP DLNA server, visible to other UPnP devices on your network, as well as iTunes; the Picture Transfer mode requires you to hook-up a camera

direct to copy across image files (I'd rather have a card reader); Surveillance function supports up to seven cameras (but failed to find my security camera at all. If this area is of interest, check you have a compatible device).

The IX2 model is better equipped than its forbear. Features include an integrated BitTorrent client and a basic Remote Access feature, which is free for the first year but then requires a subscription. The Torrent client is lightweight but effective. There is no other integrated download tool, though. With torrents falling from favour, it would be nice to have some other D/L alternatives, such as a JDownloader variant for managing Rapidshare downloads.

Network compliance is fine. The device popped up on both a PS3 and Xbox 360, and was visible to a Popcorn Hour HDX and Western Digital Live. Streaming HD media was problem free, and the IX2 is a good deal faster than its predecessor.

In a networked home entertainment system, you need a NAS to be visible, quiet and, above all, easy to use. This Iomega unit ticks all three boxes. It's also well built, offers drive redundancy and throws in some cool extras •



HCC VERDICT

Iomega IX2-200 2TB NAS
£215 Approx

Highs: Small; easy to use; integrated BitTorrent client; UPnP/DLNA compliant

Lows: No remote streaming function

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5



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One for all

If you're in the market for a no-frills DVD/HDD recorder, **Martin Pipe** reckons that Panasonic might just have the machine for you...

Only a few short years ago, the DVD/HDD recorder was third in the AV desirability stakes, behind a plasma screen and a decent surround-sound audio system. Not only would this digital dream-ticket play DVDs, but TV shows plucked out of the ether by an integral tuner or external set-top box could be recorded onto the HDD. Any material deemed worthy of preservation could be subsequently dubbed onto blank DVD-Rs, compatible with practically every regular DVD player. Extra points could be awarded if the recorder had a digital tuner.

Today, it's nearly impossible to find a recorder that doesn't have a digital tuner. Something else that can also be taken for granted is an HDMI output, which usually combines with an upscaling feature to give

standard-def DVDs and TV programmes some extra sparkle.

All of these desirable features are built into Panasonic's new DMR-EX773, which sits at the more affordable end of the brand's range. It's quite obvious where savings have been made to meet the aggressive price-point: build quality is somewhat on the lightweight side; there's only a single digital-only tuner; and the component output and front-panel S-video input of previous generations are absent. Owners of DV camcorders might also be put off by the absence of a FireWire connector for digital dubbing.

To be fair to Panasonic, though, DV camcorders are somewhat *passé* nowadays. That's probably why the company has instead provided a USB port, which can be used to dub

AV/CV

Product:
DVD/HDD
recorder

Positioning:
Lower-
midrange
model from
Panasonic

Peers:
Sony
RDR-DC100;
Toshiba
RD-99DT;
LG RHT497H

footage from HDD and SD card camcorders, and play DivX, JPEG and MP3 music files. There's no SD card slot, but you can plug in a USB-interfaced SD card reader.

Flexible

The DMR-EX773 doesn't record a TV channel's digital datastream as broadcast – it's re-encoded – but this means recording times are more flexible. And, if you stick to the lower-quality modes, you can cram a lot more on the HDD or DVD. Unfortunately, subtitles – if specified – are permanently burnt into the recording, and the recording of radio programmes is inefficient because video is preserved, too.

In all other respects, though, the machine performs splendidly. I love the no-nonsense user interface.



→ Tech Labs

It may not have changed very much in the ten or so years that Panasonic has been making DVD recorders, but **what it lacks in chic is more than compensated for in terms of friendliness.**

Less staid in appearance is the colourful GuidePlus EPG, which can schedule the 32-event/1-month timer directly. It also offers a programme-search facility, categorisation of programmes and auto-renewal recording. In other words, it helps you make the most of the expanded viewing opportunities that Freeview gives you.

Panasonic provides a choice of four recording modes, ranging from 1 to 8 hours per single-layer disc (up to 279 hours, if you're using the 160GB HDD). Editing tools for HDD allow unwanted material to be discarded with the minimum of hassle. The EX773's DVD recorder is multi-format, with support for dual-layer media. You can copy from the HDD to DVD at high speed if you're using the same recording mode. Alternatives include 'real-time' copying in a different mode, and a 'make-it-fit' option that automatically determines the recording bitrate needed to fit your selection neatly on a single disc.

Compatibility crisis?

During testing, I encountered a problem with the deck. The USB port

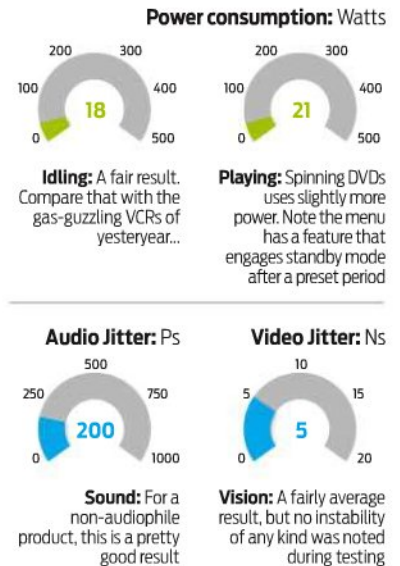
Cram it in:
The 160GB HDD can fit up to 279 hours of material

meant I could dub footage from my Everio camcorder to the HDD, and thence to DVD. Well, that's the theory; unfortunately, while the dubbing operation proceeded (at high speed) without a hitch – and the newly-HDD'ed content being playable initially – I returned to it later to find that it could no longer be accessed. There was no alternative but to carry out the dubbing operation again with fingers crossed. I've alerted Panasonic – frankly, such incompatibilities should not arise. I'm sure that everything's hunky dory if you're using a Panasonic cam, but what if you're not?

In regular use, this machine is difficult to fault. Pictures are impressive – in the top ('XP'/1hr.) mode, it's difficult to discriminate between a recording and the original source, and the SP mode is tidy, too. Digital TV itself is also nicely rendered. In all modes, sound quality is superb – as is DVD playback.

Conclusion

So overall, the DMR-EX773 is a tasty box of tricks, but one that isn't without its niggles. I also think it's about time that Panasonic included a 'datastream' recording option on its Freeview models. Come on Panny, you've already built it into your Freesat/Blu-ray recorders – don't forget the little guys! ●



→ Specifications

DVD Recorder: YES it writes to DVD-R/RW, DVD+R/RW and DVD-RAM
Dual-layer recording: YES
Hard Drive: YES 160GB (up to 279 hours recording)
DVB tuner: YES (but no analogue tuner)
Upscaling: YES to 1080p
Recording modes: 4 plus FR
MP3/JPEG playback: YES/YES
USB reader: YES
Memory card slot: NO
HDMI socket: YES with CEC support
Component output: NO
DV input: NO
Dimensions: 430(w) x 59(h) x 286(d)mm
Weight: 3.5kg
Also featuring: Handset with multi-brand TV control; RGB Scart input/output; CD jukebox; manual chapter creation; divide/partial erase; high-speed dubbing; real-time dubbing to lower-quality mode; one-touch copying between HDD/DVD; GuidePlus (without STB control); automatic grouping of recordings; playlist editing; PCM audio recording option (for XP mode); 32-event/1-month timer; playback picture adjustment; digital teletext; Freeview+ certification; view DVD while HDD records; optical digital output



HCC VERDICT

Panasonic DMR-EX773
£300 Approx

Highs: Excellent AV performance; sensibly-featured
Lows: No analogue tuner or infra-red control over STB; compatibility issues with camcorder dubbing

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5
Design: 1 2 3 4 5
Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5



Blu-ray strip show

Gareth Mason wonders if he's getting the full monty for £170

With the DMP-BD45, Blu-ray stalwart Panasonic hopes to fend off its rivals by leveraging open a gap in the competitive entry-level market with an affordable stripped-down player. Its saving grace is likely to be that it's the features that have been cut, rather than anything that's likely to affect the player's performance.

The company's pedigree in this respect make this deck a solidly reliable buy. There's still a market out there for those who have little interest in anything bar the pictures and sound, and Panasonic has these people in its sights.

Highs

● Blu-ray pictures are stunning, exhibiting great detail, texture, depth and clarity with no digital unpleasantness to spoil the show.

● Audio also earns worthy plaudits. Through the HDMI, detail is subtle and clear with plenty of bass, and is backed up by an expansive soundstage.
● The remote and onscreen menus complement each other and are well designed and easy to negotiate.
● Picture processing benefits from the deck's use of the spanking new P4HD version from higher up the range. Upscaling and motion detection are part of its armoury.

Lows

● Bizarrely, this is a Profile 1.1 machine, meaning BD-Live is sacrificed. I wasn't even aware the BDA allowed 1.1 decks to be sold, and

this makes the DMP-BD45 almost obsolete in tech terms.

● It's not only the Ethernet port that's gone – the BD45 also lacks multichannel analogue outputs, meaning no lossless audio if you own an HDMI-free amplifier.
● Some BD-Live models can be found for a similar amount and a little more could buy you a stonker.

Old school:
Dare you buy a Profile 1.1 Blu-ray spinner?



HCC VERDICT

Panasonic DMP-BD45
£170 Approx

Overall: **1 2 3 4 5**

TVHANGA WALLMOUNT → FROM £10 Approx → www.tvhanga.com

How's it hanging?

Chris Jenkins mounts his flatscreen TV with little fuss

TVhanga is a system for hanging flatscreen TVs on a brick, wood, stone or plasterboard wall. It relies on inserting bolts into the TV's VESA connection sockets, then hanging these on a set of two or four brackets screwed to the wall. Each bracket will bear a weight of 60kg, giving a total of 120kg for a small set with two brackets, and 240kg for a large one with four – enough for any TV.

The brackets come in a number of profiles: surface, ultra-low profile,

and low profile. The ULP and LP models allow you to pass cables through them; the surface type is designed so the TV is completely flat against the wall, and you chase inlets into the wall to allow space for cables.

The TVhanga kit comes with a large plastic template sheet with a built-in spirit level, marked with outlines for four different sizes of screen and an instructional DVD.

Using the flattest of the brackets, with the wall chased to fit the bolt-heads and cables, will result in your TV standing only 1.2mm off the wall; and you can't get much flatter than that. Of course, you won't be able to angle it, but TVhanga is working on a low-profile swivelling bracket to solve that one.

is a sound alternative to a more cumbersome mount, and the services of a fitter.

● The whole kit fits in a small cardboard tube, unlike some of the massive TV mounts we've seen.
● It's economical – prices range from £10 to £50 depending on size/type.

Lows

● You can't angle the TV once it's been mounted.
● Simple though it is, we wouldn't recommend you tackle fitting this unless you're confident using a power drill and screwdriver. And it's definitely a two-man job getting a large set up on the mounts.

HCC VERDICT

TVhanga flatscreen wallmount
£10-£50 Approx

Overall: **1 2 3 4 5**



In Brief

"Yippee Ki-Yay Moviegoer!"
Titan Books
£10 approx



Seagology
author Vern is back with a collection of writings about 'Bruce Willis, Badass Cinema and Other Important Topics'. Unlike his previous book, this is a collection of 'net reviews and essays. It lacks the cohesion of his superb study of Steven Seagal's career, but is still a damn funny read.

1 2 3 4 5



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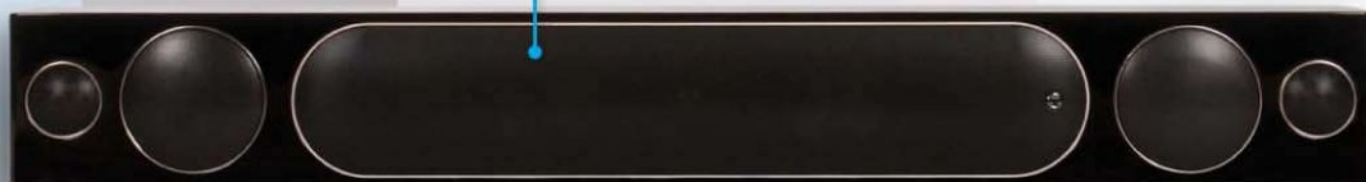
Raising the bar

Adrian Justins lets his TV's speakers take a holiday and auditions four stylish soundbar solutions

MONITOR AUDIO RADIUS ONE HD

£450 Approx

MA's Radius series soundbar is passive, so it requires a separate amp to deliver left, centre and right channels to its individually crafted drivers



SAMSUNG HWC450

£250 Approx

Compact and grille-free, this Samsung slab contains decoders for DD and DTS 5.1 soundtracks, a bevy of DSP modes and a wireless subwoofer for extra bass



THE TEST

The quest to make flatscreens as slim as possible comes at a cost – sound quality. No matter what size screen you buy you'll probably only get two weedy 10W speakers. Rather shocking really, but it's generally accepted

that anyone who gives a jot about sound will invest in a separate audio system. Ideally this will be a surround one, but when cost or clutter are overriding factors a good compromise is a soundbar.

Soundbars vary greatly in terms of what they can do

– some require a separate amp, some come with a subwoofer, some offer a virtual surround effect – but they all do one thing – improve your TV's sound. You just need to find one that sounds as good as your TV looks (and works with your other kit).



YAMAHA YSP-5100

£1,350 Approx

A premium-priced beast, packed to the grilles with HD decoders, HDMI switching and over 40 mini drivers that ping individual sound beams around your room



TEUFEL SOUNDBAR 50

£670 Approx

Available directly from Teufel in Germany, the Soundbar 50 comes supplied with a sizeable subwoofer. Connectivity and audio processing are fairly basic

At their most basic, soundbars are loudspeakers, like the Monitor Audio Radius one HD, in the shape of a bar (*quelle surprise*). They are designed to sit under your TV and are capable of superior audio reproduction when hooked up to an amplifier.

Most soundbars, however, cram in some internal electronics coupled with a variety of audio inputs, and are capable of decoding Dolby Digital and DTS 5.1 surround sound formats.

Taken to its logical conclusion, the highest specified models, such as Yamaha's YSP-5100, are a match for most high-end amplifiers with high-resolution audio decoding and amplification, HDMI connections, and video switching.

Although all soundbars are guaranteed to improve on a TV's performance, there's only so much a single bar can do and many models overcome the physical constraints of the narrow shape by including a separate subwoofer to

provide meaningful bass reproduction. Of course, introducing a subwoofer introduces clutter so, as with the Samsung on test here, a wireless sub often provides the neatest solution.

The models in this grouptest cover all the bases in terms of functionality and the results should at the very least help you in choosing the right type of soundbar.

Design

A problem with soundbars is that they aren't really suitable for plonking down in front of a television, as they often block the screen's remote signal or sit awkwardly on your AV furniture. That's why **all of our test models can be wall-mounted using supplied brackets** or placed in an AV rack, although the Yamaha YSP-5100's substantial dimensions require an equally sizeable rack.

The Samsung is the cheapest-looking, made of lightweight plastic

and with no grille protecting its drivers. It's certain to need careful dusting. That's not to say it feels cheap, it's just that the other three are more solidly-built, with the Monitor Audio Radius One HD boasting the cleanest look and classiest design. Note that with this 'bar the bass is front-ported for the centre channel but downward-firing for the left and right channels, so it can't be placed on a flat surface.

Yamaha's YSP-5100 packs in some substantial electronics and weighs a serious 11kg. Whilst not exactly ugly, it does lack a bit of finesse. Teufel's Cinebar 50 is a good compromise between functionality and aesthetics, although the front-mounted USB port mars the central control panel, which is also home to an LED display and buttons that control power, source and volume.

Other connections on all models are on the rear, as you'd expect. Samsung and Yamaha have

SAMSUNG HWC450 → £250 Approx → www.samsung.com



In brief

This package's 120W wirelessly-connected subwoofer offers some real welly with unbeatable convenience and flexibility. Inputs on the bar are limited, though, with no coaxial audio socket, and Samsung makes no claim about generating surround sound – it's strictly a 2.1 solution. Unsurprising, then, that audio decoding doesn't stretch to

any hi-res Blu-ray formats, but this compact unit does boast a selection of seven soundfield modes to suit whatever genre you're playing.

Around the back:

The Samsung soundbar's rear sockets are recessed, meaning it can be fitted flush against a wall



recessed sockets to allow flush wall mounting, but not so with the Teufel. This comes with 1in-deep brackets that make it stick out when mounted on a wall, a rather unsightly solution when viewed from off-axis.

The Samsung's compact Wi-Fi subwoofer can be tucked away behind the sofa if you want, but I actually think it's a smart-looking piece of kit. On the other hand, the Teufel's wired bass bin is

DESIGN

Round-up: Well, they're all black and oblong-shaped, but Monitor Audio's model is probably the cleanest and classiest-looking of this quartet. Samsung's grilleless affair is less impressive but benefits from its a compact wireless subwoofer. Both the Teufel and Yamaha bars offer a no-nonsense design that should blend easily with your flatscreen TV

Samsung HWC450: 1 2 3 4 5

Yamaha YSP-5100: 1 2 3 4 5

Monitor Audio Radius 1 HD: 1 2 3 4 5

Teufel Soundbar 50: 1 2 3 4 5

a brute that will consume a substantial amount of living room real estate and must be placed at least two feet away from any other electronics.

Aside from the Monitor Audio Radius One HD, each of these soundbars is supplied with a remote control. Teufel's is one of those cheap looking credit-card sized jobs, the Samsung's half-pint handset has about a dozen buttons, whilst **the Yamaha comes with one of the tallest, most heavy-duty remote handsets around.** The latter two seem well matched to their respective components but both have some redundant buttons.

Features

Monitor Audio's Radius One HD is simply a passive loudspeaker (hence why it doesn't ship with a remote control), albeit one specifically tailored to soundbar duties. Each of its three channels

has a dedicated braced compartment and individually-specified crossovers. The centre channel section houses twin 4in MMP II mid/bass drivers while the left and right channels make do with one each. All three channels provide high-frequency thrills from 1in C-CAM gold dome tweeters.

The Teufel Cinebar 50 has six individual drivers in the main unit (two tweeters, two mid-rangers and two low-mids). These are powered by an integrated 2 x 100W RMS power amp.

Samsung's HWC450 again uses six drivers in a two-channel array; two 1.5in tweeters, and four 2in mid-rangers. The amplification is rated at 2 x 80W.

The Yamaha YSP5100 does things altogether differently, packing more drivers than an a BSM learning centre (well, 44) into its chassis. Each 4.5in subwoofer is powered by a 20W amp, with the other cones powered by 80W of further grunt. ➤

YAMAHA YSP-5100 → £1,350 Approx → <http://yamaha.com>



In brief

This is the latest in a long line of sound projectors from the daddy of the technology. With features including HDMI switching, multiple audio inputs and every cutting-edge audio decoder under the sun, the YSP-5100 is more than ready to generate actual multichannel surround sound from its 44 mini drivers, by bouncing sound off your walls and ceiling to arrive at your sweet spot in perfect synchronisation. It's a premium bit of kit with price tag to match.

Jack pack: Yamaha's soundbar features a wealth of analogue and digital hookups



For a soundbar, it can't harm to have as many input connections as possible, especially digital, but some of our grouptest challengers are a bit underwhelming in this regard. The Teufel has one coaxial and one optical input plus dual stereo phonos. Sure, many DVD and Blu-ray decks have coaxial audio outputs but many also only have optical outputs, so one optical input on a soundbar may not be enough for anyone hoping to hookup to an STB (eg Sky+ HD), disc-spinner and flatscreen TV.

The Samsung is not much better, with just dual optical inputs and one analogue stereo jack.

Both these models are capable of Dolby Digital 5.1 decoding. The Teufel adds Dolby Virtual Speaker and Samsung has DTS decoding. They also offer pre-set DSP modes for different genres. The Samsung HWC450 has a handy optional auto-on setting so that it always fires up when you switch on your source.

The Yamaha's connections put it in a different league, quite frankly. Four HDMI inputs and one output make it a proper home cinema hub. These are complemented by dual optical and a single coaxial audio input plus analogue component video, 7.1 preouts and onboard decoding of most common DVD and Blu-ray audio formats. Eleven DSP modes are available except when listening to straight stereo or HD audio signals. A wireless subwoofer can be added although it wasn't tested here.

Because of the passive nature of the Monitor Audio Radius One HD, it's bereft of any inputs save its three sets of speaker terminals.

Performance

The real test of any home cinema component is, of course, how it performs, and there are clear differences between the quartet of products tested here.

Hooked up to a Denon AVR, the Monitor Audio Radius one HD does

a superb job. Listening to the *Fantastic Four* Blu-ray, the Thing's growly voice can be heard effortlessly, and even at loud volumes the fire truck crashing on the Brooklyn Bridge doesn't screech painfully.

Listening to TV material is so much more engrossing, too. When I routed a Panasonic Viera's optical output to the Radius One HD via the Denon, dialogue almost took on life-like quality. Not being a huge fan of loud bass [Eh? Ed], I'm more

FEATURES

Round-up: The Yamaha YSP-5100 easily claims top spot in this category, thanks to its extensive connectivity, audio decoders and supplied setup mic. The Samsung and Teufel models offer quite basic hookup and sound processing. The passive Radius One has little in the way of features, other than its quality drive units.

Samsung HWC450: 1 2 3 4 5

Yamaha YSP-5100 1 2 3 4 5

Monitor Audio Radius 1 HD: 1 2 3 4 5

Teufel Cinebar 50: 1 2 3 4 5

MONITOR AUDIO RADIUS ONE HD → £450 Approx → www.monitoraudio.co.uk



In brief

There are no electronics within the Radius one HD – it's simply an elongated loudspeaker that combines the drivers for left, centre and right channels. Built to complement MA's acclaimed Radius lineup, the One HD borrows heavily from its higher-end stablemates and makes no compromise in its design or constructions.

Speakeasy:

Connectivity is limited to speaker terminals – just wire it up to your amp for a stylish front soundstage solution



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than happy with the low frequencies that the MA soundbar generates, but others may crave greater low-frequency impact, especially when watching movies.

Although it never feels like surround sound, **the Samsung HWC450's cinema mode creates a hugely dynamic soundfield** from the *Fantastic Four*'s PCM mix and is particularly adept with mid to low range frequencies, although it sometimes struggles to pick out dialogue. The subwoofer is pleasingly free from colouration and is easily tweaked using the remote. For such an affordable product, the performance impresses.

Yamaha's YSP-5100 is a sophisticated beast, easily at its best when fed the *Fantastic Four*'s DTS-HD Master Audio soundtrack where lower frequencies have greater impact than the DTS ES alternative, yet they mesh perfectly and with greater subtlety than the 'bars with a separate subwoofer.

Higher frequencies tend to sound a bit clipped and metallic, but the YSP-5100 does make a convincing job of generating a genuine wrap-around soundfield, such as when a helicopter feels like it's passing across the back of the sofa.

On the other hand, there's no sense of being surrounded by the Teufel's virtual surround mode, but the Cinebar 50 still delivers a highly immersive experience. Dialogue comes through without feeling forced and you really notice individual sounds such as car doors shutting and windows smashing. I'd advise some restraint with the remote control, though, as things tend to get a bit mushy at high volumes.

The Teufel's behemoth-like subwoofer dovetails with the soundbar to serve up some fairly thunderous yet nicely controlled bass and like the Samsung's sub, can be tweaked from the main unit's remote control. >

PERFORMANCE

Round-up: The Radius One HD is superb even when driven loud, though some might want more LFE impact – it's matched by Yamaha's 'bar and it's genuinely impressive virtual surround processing. Samsung's cinema mode creates an impressive soundfield, though not much of a surround effect; similar to the performance of the Teufel Cinebar, in fact.

Samsung HWC450: 1 2 3 4 5

Yamaha YSP-5100 1 2 3 4 5

Monitor Audio Radius 1 HD: 1 2 3 4 5

Teufel Cinebar 50: 1 2 3 4 5

TEUFEL CINEBAR 50 → £670 Approx → www.teufel.eu



In brief

Another soundbar-subwoofer package, Teufel's Cinebar 50 is a 350W 2.1 system with some unusual touches, such as an MP3-compatible USB socket. Other inputs include both coaxial and optical digital audio. With basic audio decoding and amplification, the Cinebar 50 doesn't have any real surround sound pretensions, but does promise to

beef up your flatscreen TV's sound substantially. As with all Teufel products, it's only available direct from the retailer online, but the company does offer an eight-week return policy.

Super scaler:

Rear inputs are coaxial, optical and analogue – we think you might end up wishing for another optical jack



Final standings

All these soundbars deliver a vastly superior listening experience to any TV's built-in speakers. My Panasonic TV is a great plasma screen but reverting to its own sound system after using the soundbars is harder to bear than banging your shin on the Teufel's sub.

This foursome splits into two sub-groups, with Samsung and Teufel fighting to avoid the wooden spoon. There's not a lot between them features-wise – but I'd rather have a wireless sub than a USB socket that plays MP3s to a rather ordinary standard. Neither achieves anything like real surround sound but they both deliver an immersive and enjoyable soundfield. Samsung edges it as it delivers a similar performance for a lot less money and is a much tidier solution.

In some senses, comparing the Monitor Audio Radius One HD with the other three seems unfair given its passive nature, but its



presence pays rich dividends as it shows the acoustic echelons that can be reached.

If I was picking the winner based on audio excellence I would choose the Monitor Audio 'bar, as it has the cleanest, most relishable sound and with a decent amp can be cranked up higher than you'll ever need without suffering distortion.

But top spot goes to the Yamaha, as it fulfils the overall brief so well. With a healthy HDMI and digital audio input count, it's better connected than Steven Spielberg, and it handles every important AV format going – bar 3D. Its bouncing beams create surround sound with a degree of subtlety your TV's own speakers can't touch ●



HCC VERDICT

Yamaha YSP-5100
£1,350 Approx

Highs: Precise sound; HDMI switching; handles hi-res BD audio formats

Lows: Slightly shrill at high volume; not the prettiest

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

→ Specifications

Amplified power: 40 x 20W
Subwoofer: 2 x 20W

Drive units: 40 x 1.5in mids diameter; 2 x 1in tweeters; 2 x 4.5in woofers

Frequency response: 75Hz–20kHz

Decodes: Dolby TrueHD, Dolby Digital/Plus/Surround EX, Pro-Logic/II/Ix; DTS–HD MA/HR/96/24/ES/Neo: 6

Inputs: 4 x HDMI; 2 x audio; 1 x coaxial; stereo minijack; USB; component/composite video; 2 x phono; 7.1 pre-outs; IR control; RS232C; Intellibeam mic; wireless to iPod dock

Outputs: HDMI; IR out;

component/composite video
Dimensions: 1200(w) x 212(h) x 90(d)mm **Weight:** 11kg

Other features: Remote; compressed music enhancer; bass extension; auto setup; UniVolume; FM tuner; Cinema DSP modes; optional sub



HCC VERDICT

Monitor Audio Radius One HD
£450 Approx

Highs: Superb clarity at all volumes; controlled and powerful sound; build quality

Lows: Needs amplification and audio processing

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

→ Specifications

Amplified power: 100W x 2, 150W centre

Subwoofer: N/A

Drive units: 4 x 4in MMP2 cone bass/mid; 3 x 1in C-CAM gold dome tweeter

Frequency response: 55Hz–35kHz

Decodes: N/A

Inputs: Binding post terminals for L/R/C channels

Outputs: N/A

Dimensions: 1010(w) x 125(h) x 105(d)mm
Weight: 8kg

Other features: centre bass reflex front ported, sides bass reflex ported to underside; magnetically shielded drivers; wall-mount bracket supplied



HCC VERDICT

Samsung HWC450
£250 Approx

Highs: All-round clarity; well controlled wireless sub; compact size

Lows: Struggles at high volume; limited inputs; no grille

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

→ Specifications

Amplified power: 2 x 80W
Subwoofer: 120W

Drive units: 2 x 1.5in; 4 x 2in

Frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz
Decodes: Dolby Digital; DTS; SFE (Sound Field Effect)

Inputs: 2 x digital optical audio; stereo minijack; USB

Outputs: Wireless connection to sub

Dimensions: 957(w) x 92(h) x 46(d)mm

Weight: 2.3kg (sub 5.4kg)

Other features: Remote control handset; 7 x Sound Field Modes (News, Drama, Sports, Game, Cinema, Music, Pass); wall mount bracket; lip sync adjustment; DRC; dimmer; volume stabiliser



HCC VERDICT

Teufel Cinebar 50
£670 Approx

Highs: Immersive all-round listening; plays MP3s via USB;

Lows: Huge subwoofer; pseudo surround; limited inputs; struggles at high volume

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

→ Specifications

Amplified power: 2 x 100W
Subwoofer: 150W

Drive units: 2 x 1in tweeter, 2 x 4in mid-range, 2 x 4in low/mid-range

Frequency response:

main unit n/a (subwoofer): 35–150Hz

Decodes: Dolby Digital; DTS;

Dolby Pro-Logic

Inputs: Digital optical/coaxial audio; 2 x stereo phono; USB

Outputs: Subwoofer

Dimensions: 1010(w) x 130(h) x 100(d)mm

Weight: 12kg (subwoofer 18kg)

Other features: MP3, MP3 Pro, WMA compatible; remote; Bass management; shielded; wall mount brackets and table stand; optional iPod dock; EQ presets; Reference/stereo/wide modes; bass and treble tone control

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PLAYBACK

→ **Software highlights** **SHERLOCK HOLMES** The world's greatest detective goes hi-def **MINORITY REPORT** Spielberg's sci-fi thriller hits Blu-ray **THE BOX** Dare you open it? **TRUE BLOOD** The second season of the hit vampire show is on the prowl **THE DESCENT: PART 2** Spelunking spells trouble once again **EVANGELION 1.11** Hi-def anime remake **AND MUCH MORE!**

Precious

The Lord of the Rings: The Motion Picture Trilogy → Region B BD

The acclaimed fantasy saga finally takes a bow on Blu-ray. Check out our in-depth review on p115 to see if this is the one Blu-ray boxset to rule them all



HCC Ratings key

Legolas	1 2 3 4 5
Prince Nuada	1 2 3 4 5
Buddy	1 2 3 4 5
Patch	1 2 3 4 5
Dobby	1 2 3 4 5

Bored with solving crimes, Holmes now spends his spare time committing them



Holmes cinema hero

The pipe-smoking sleuth makes his hi-def debut



HCC VERDICT

Sherlock Holmes
Warner Home Video → All-region
BD/R2 DVD → £27 Approx

We say: An agreeable hi-def outing for this action-packed take on the master detective

Picture: 1 2 3 4 5

Sound: 1 2 3 4 5

Extras: 1 2 3 4 5

Movie: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

Sherlock Holmes is a bit of a rarity.

A Hollywood blockbuster not based on a superhero or packed with rampaging robots, it fills the hole vacated by the likes of *Romancing the Stone*, *The Mummy*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* et al. It's an energetic romp, mixing action set-pieces with moments of comedy, hammy acting and lush set design. The fact that the hackneyed plot would have Sir Arthur Conan Doyle vomiting into his popcorn matters not a jot.

Mark Craven: It's not always the prettiest hi-def imagery you'll ever see, but this VC-1 1080p 1.85:1 picture excels at capturing the grime and dirt that abounds in Guy Ritchie's street-level reinvention of Holmes. Detailing is very good throughout, despite some rather obvious (and clearly intentional) crushed blacks, and the odd burst of vivid colour (such as Rachel McAdams' red dress) really pops from the mainly monochromatic visuals. Particularly impressive is the clarity of the slow-motion footage used for what Ritchie dubs the 'Holmes-o-Vision' sequences, which are simply staggering in their sharpness and detailing.

Chris Jenkins: This Blu-ray's DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 track is a magnificently detailed and atmospheric affair, that brings the bustling streets and spooky crypts of Holmes' London to life with considerable aplomb. The clarity of the mix is exemplified by the precision and sharpness of the

string instruments employed throughout Hans Zimmer's lively score, while sonic FX, such as the shrill ring accompanying a ricocheting bullet as Holmes and Watson stop a human sacrifice in the opening scene, or the aggressive bass accompanying the blows during the detective's bare-knuckle boxing, prove just how powerful and immersive the soundtrack can be.

Anton van Beek: Rather than loading the disc with unnecessary features, the main focus of this Blu-ray's supplementary material is another of Warner's Maximum Movie Modes. Guy Ritchie hosts this interactive look at the making of the film, providing plenty of commentary, and discussion of specific sequences, and he's accompanied by stills, b-roll footage, additional PiP interviews, a Holmes timeline and links to eight short featurettes. As usual, these Focus Point featurettes can be accessed directly from the Special Features menu and cover a variety of topics, from set design to CG FX and an introduction to New York's Baker Street Irregulars organisation. Rounding out the disc is an additional 14-min *Making of...* featurette and a BD-Live weblink. The set also has a DVD and Digital Copy of the film.



44inch Chest

Momentum Pictures → Region B BD
£25 Approx



Ray Winstone reunites with *Sexy Beast* screenwriters Louise Mellis and David Scinto in

this intriguing study of love, loss and machismo. Taking place almost entirely in a single room, this insular story might feel more at home on the stage, but there's still plenty to enjoy, although the film's subdued direction means the AVC 1.85:1 1080p encode is lacking in pizzazz. The DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is almost entirely focussed on the front speakers, too. Extras include a featurette and character profiles, but not the commentary announced for the US Blu-ray of this Brit-flick. **RH**

1 2 3 4 5

The Informant!

Warner Home Video → All-region BD
£27 Approx



With *The Informant!*, Steven Soderbergh has cooked up a deadpan comedy that leaves you

wondering what parts of the story (about a rather delusional executive helping the FBI uncover an international price-fixing scam) are true, and which bits have been embellished. Despite being shot using RED ONE cameras, it doesn't always sparkle in HD, thanks to intentionally blown-out contrast and soft lighting, while the TrueHD 5.1 audio rarely strays beyond the front speakers. Extras are limited to a commentary and four deleted scenes. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

The Fourth Kind

Entertainment in Video → Region B
BD → £25 Approx



Based on 'true events', *The Fourth Kind* is an exploitation vehicle in the same vein as

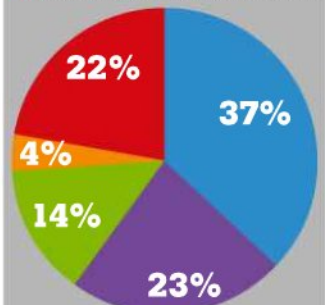
The Blair Witch Project and *Paranormal Activity* (albeit on a larger budget and not as good). Breaking the fourth wall from the start, it begins with Mila Jovovich saying that she'll be playing the lead character in a reconstruction of events surrounding alien abductions in a small Alaskan town. The film is then inter-cut with 'real' archival footage. It looks great in HD (bar the camcorder footage) and the DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio is impressively expansive. The only extra is the trailer. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

Your views...

So, no 3D BD release of *Avatar* planned for this year...

- Well, at least it's hi-def
- I only want to watch it in 3D!
- I'm more fussed about the lack of extras
- Who cares? I only buy DVDs
- Who cares? It's an awful film



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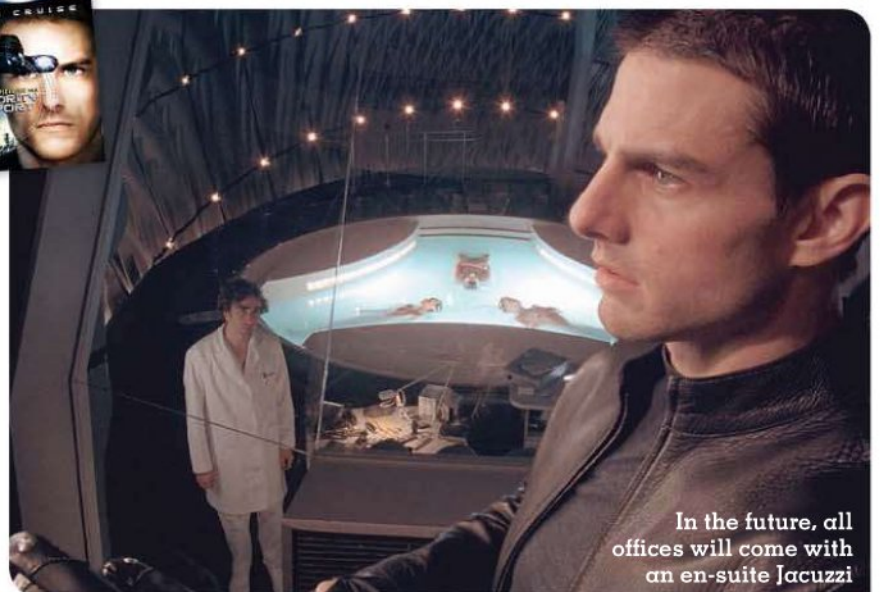
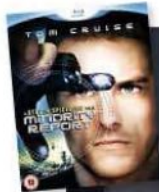
The future looks good

Cruise + Spielberg + Dick = must-own Blu-ray

Minority Report is a slick and effective sci-fi that blends the big ideas of author Philip K Dick, the cinematic blockbuster flair of director Steven Spielberg, and the box office draw of Tom Cruise. It's thrilling stuff, packed with plenty of pulse-pounding action scenes that (thankfully) paper over the many plot holes that emerge when you start thinking about things a little too hard.

Mark Craven: The one word that immediately springs to mind when considering *Minority Report*'s Blu-ray transfer is grainy. Possibly the pinnacle of Spielberg's post-*Saving Private Ryan* use of heavily grained imagery and desaturated colours, it's certainly a striking film to look at. And this Blu-ray's AVC 2.40:1 encode matches the intended look of the film, with incredibly deep blacks, a steely blue and grey colour palette and a marvellously gritty texture. The only downside is some occasional artefacting, which could well be down to the extra compression needed to fit the film and extras on a single BD50 – Paramount's region-locked US release benefits from a BD50 for the film and houses the extras on a separate BD.

Steve May: The fidelity of this platter is undeniably impressive, even if for the most part the soundtrack lacks the traditional fireworks of the SF genre. Still, the futuristic 5.1 DTS HD Master Audio mix thrums with imagination: the Pre-cog sequences have a disjointed, submerged quality that's spread around the soundstage, while Tom Cruise's flight 45 minutes in is rich with wild FX.



In the future, all offices will come with an en-suite Jacuzzi

The metro sequence is particularly evocative, leading to a rich multichannel pursuit that proves ideal demo material.

The John Williams score is a cut apart from the usual sci-fi actioner, with tension and suspense ousting histrionics. Often his themes are underplayed, albeit with copious aural FX mixed in – in a style that often seems to channel the classics of Hitchcock.

Anton van Beek: As usual, we get no commentary from Spielberg, but there's a wealth of material that fills the gap. All 17 featurettes, 13 art galleries, three storyboards and three trailers from the Special Edition DVD are present (with all but the trailers now presented in hi-def), and are joined by a host of exclusive new material. In amongst these you'll find two Pre-viz sequences and seven new featurettes (all in HD). Best of the bunch is *The Future According to Steven Spielberg*, an interactive 34-min interview with the filmmaker, with seamless branching to related video and gallery content taken from the old DVD features.



HCC VERDICT

Minority Report
20th Century Fox → All-region
BD → £23 Approx

We say: With its extensive extras and impressive AV performance this is a treat for sci-fi and Spielberg fans

Picture: 1 2 3 4 5

Sound: 1 2 3 4 5

Extras: 1 2 3 4 5

Movie: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

Angelic anime

The Japanese cartoon classic is reborn for the hi-def generation

Evangelion 1.11 – You Are (Not) Alone

is the first in a new four-part cinematic reworking of the popular mid-'90s anime TV series *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, adding its own wrinkles to this epic tale through new scenes and the addition of seamlessly integrated CG animation. The 1.11 in the title refers to the fact that this is the second revision of the film since its cinema release – version 1.0 enhanced around 265 shots from the film, while 1.11 features an additional three minutes of new animation, plus further enhancements to the picture and audio quality.

Mark Craven: I know very little about anime, but like to think that I know a thing or two about what makes for a great hi-def transfer, and this Blu-ray release of *Evangelion 1.11* certainly has one. The AVC-encoded 1.78:1 1080p visuals are magnificent, boasting beautifully saturated colours (free from banding), blacks deep enough to lose yourself in and pin-sharp line detail on the hand-drawn elements. *Subarashii!*

Steve May: With both the original Japanese language track and an accomplished English dub in Dolby TrueHD 6.1, this disc would appear to offer fans a no-compromise listening choice. However, comparing the two quickly reveals that the Japanese original has detail in the rear that's missing from the dub. Maybe the cost or complexity of dubbing rear-channel language was deemed too much. As a consequence, the best audio experience is unquestionably with the original cut; only this offers the 360° surround that TrueHD 6.1 can deliver. That said,



HCC VERDICT

Evangelion 1.11 – You Are (Not) Alone → Manga → Region B BD
£25 Approx

We say: Despite the poor extras, excellent AV quality makes this BD a must-have for anime hedz

Picture: 1 2 3 4 5

Sound: 1 2 3 4 5

Extras: 1 2 3 4 5

Movie: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

both sport silky dialogue, thumping LFE, and a fidelity that demands to be heard on the finest replay equipment.

Anton van Beek: Fans have come to expect disappointing extras on the majority of anime titles, and *Evangelion 1.11* is no exception. All that's on offer is a 16-minute compilation of animatics highlighting the changes made to this version of the film and a bunch of promo material in the form of four music videos (three of which are slight alterations of the same video), and two 'News Flashes'. That said, HMV is offering an exclusive Collector's Edition BD that comes bundled with a bonus booklet and a DVD containing the 1.01 version of the film.

Mecha: There's no shortage of giant robot action here

The Box

Icon → All-region BD
£18 Approx



It's starting to look like *Donnie Darko* was a fluke for filmmaker Richard Kelly. His second flick *Southland*

Tales was an ungainly mess; now he's cooked up this ludicrous sci-fi morality tale that takes Richard Matheson's short story *Button, Button* and expands it out to feature length. The opening act (essentially the adaptation of the short) is fine, but after this Kelly heads off into an explanation of the titular box – and the result is awful. On a positive note, this BD release delivers a solid AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode, an atmospheric DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix and a commentary among the extras. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

Universal Soldier: Regeneration

Optimum → Region B
£20 Approx



This straight-to-DVD (or in this case BD) sequel, featuring a couple of past-their-prime action stars

(Van Damme and Lundgren) turns out to be an absolute blast and easily the best entry in the franchise. The disc falls a little flat with its 2.35:1 1080p encode, which suffers from curious motion juddering during camera pans, but on the other hand, the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is a monumental treat, pumping out impressive spatial FX and serious low-end dynamics with ease. Extras include a commentary, *Making of...* featurette and trailer. **MC**

1 2 3 4 5

Stargate: Ultimate Edition

Optimum → Region B
£25 Approx



Despite my general sense of apathy when it comes to the many *Stargate* TV series, I'm fond of Roland

Emmerich's original movie. Fans will be aware that this is Optimum's second BD outing for the film, and it's definitely an improvement. Gone is the offensive contrast-boosting and excessive colour saturation that affected the earlier release – in its place a more naturally filmic presentation. Similarly, the DTS-HD MA audio has been upgraded from 5.1 to 7.1, and it's a robust affair. Quality extras include a new featurette and PIP video. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

BSG: The Plan

Universal Playback → All-region BD
£25 Approx



Not quite the triumphant final hurrah that *BSG* fans might have hoped for, *The Plan* instead

seeks to re-examine key moments from the popular sci-fi series from the point of view of the Cylons (as well as fill the odd plot hole). Visually, *The Plan's* VC-1 1.78:1 encode is a perfect match to the distinctive (if not always pretty) visual style of its parent series, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix gets the odd chance to shine – such as the opening destruction of the Twelve Colonies. Extras include an audio commentary, deleted scenes, four short featurettes and My Scenes functionality. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

The organisers of the Middle Earth Grand National had yet to insist on coloured outfits



One BD to rule them all?

Well, not quite – this trilogy box set may leave you feeling short-changed



The Lord of the Rings Trilogy

ranks alongside the *Star Wars* saga as the most sought-after Blu-ray release ever, and now Peter Jackson's superb adaptation of Tolkien's fantasy series has finally arrived in HD, but only in the original theatrical cut. Should you buy now, or wait for the likely Extended versions?

Anton van Beek: While *LotR* doesn't look as spectacular in hi-def as some might have expected, the VC-1 2.40:1 1080p encodes certainly aren't the disaster some fans have claimed online.

The Fellowship of the Ring is the most problematic. It looks surprisingly soft in places, and some heavy-handed DNR reduces fine detailing. But it's not easy to know where the blame lies. Comparisons with previous DVDs show that the film always had a rather inconsistent look, and, as this is the only one of the trilogy that wasn't done as 100 per cent Digital Intermediate in post-production, this DNR could have been applied prior to the mastering of the Blu-ray discs. The end result is a rather middling hi-def experience, but I'm not sure exactly how much better it could ever be.

The Two Towers and *The Return of the King* fare better, with enhanced

detail, crisp textures, and more consistent hi-def presentation. A lot of which probably has to do with just how much of both films rely on CGI.

Steve May: *LotR* is a majestic audio experience. Epic in scale, with breathtaking design and glistening technical credentials, it pounds and thrills in a way few other movies manage. The trilogy is presented in a DTS-HD MA ES 6.1 mix (although not all AVR's can decode the DTS ES matrix). Demo-worthy sequences are rife, but for one of the most thrilling examples of action cinema sound, you won't do much better than the Battle of Helm's Deep: arrows whistle across the soundstage, Orcs roar and blades clash –

and then there's a monstrous bass bloom as the Deeping Wall is breached. Bravo!

Anton van Beek: The extra features on this collection are poor – only a series of HD trailers and a crappy videogame are new. The second disc for each film is simply the relevant Disc Two from the theatrical DVD release; essentially all 'net featurettes and TV specials made to promote the movies, which completely lack the depth and insight of the more comprehensive material found on the Appendix discs for the Extended Edition DVDs of the trilogy.



HCC VERDICT

The Lord of the Rings: The Motion Picture Trilogy → EIV Region B BD/R2 DVD £75 Approx

We say: This feels little more than a stop-gap release before the eventual Extended Edition BD Trilogy

Picture: 1 2 3 4 5

Sound: 1 2 3 4 5

Extras: 1 2 3 4 5

Movie: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

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Going underground

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The Descent: Part 2 picks up a few days after the end of the original, with Sarah (Shauna MacDonald) emerging bloodied and bruised from her caving ordeal. In a state of shock, she has no memory of what happened to her colleagues, and ends up being taken back down into the cave system by a local sheriff to discover the truth.

While it's not a patch on the brilliant original, *The Descent: Part 2* proves to be a fun slice of brutal horror. There are some great scares, plenty of crowd-pleasing gore and once the action moves underground the pacing never lets up.

Mark Craven: This horror sequel boasts a respectable AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode that seems to get better as the film goes on. The opening daylight scenes feature a pleasing patina of film grain and reasonable colour reproduction, but feel rather flat. When the action moves underground, though, things pick up, with some wonderfully inky blacks and excellent detailing that manages to highlight every airborne particle caught in the torch beams.

Steve May: *The Descent: Part 2* is unusual in so much as it digs deep to offer both a PCM 5.1 mix and a DTS 5.1 HD MA alternative. As a general rule I would always advise opting for the native PCM track first, and here it sounds a little more rounded and intense than the DTS mix, with excellent vocal integrity. While the movie may be a bit of a retread, the D2 soundtrack delivers a jolting, clanking, rumbling horror ride that should, at volume, succeed in shocking you out of your seat. The audio design adds immeasurably to the atmosphere of this screamquel, and the Foley



work is terrific. You really will think you're traversing deep creature-tastic caverns.

Anton van Beek: Much like the film they support, the extras on this Blu-ray release are entertaining if not particularly inspired or original. Director Jon Harris is joined by the lead actresses for a chatty commentary track. Supporting this is a solid four-part 26-minute *Making of...* documentary featuring interviews with most of the principle cast and crew. Rounding out the collection are nine deleted scenes with or without commentary (annoyingly you can't toggle between the audio on the fly), five storyboard sequences, a production design gallery and the trailer.

HCC VERDICT

The Descent: Part 2 → Pathé Region B BD → £29 Approx

We say: An unnecessary but fun horror sequel gets a similarly uninspired but perfectly acceptable Blu-ray package

Picture: 1 2 3 4 5

Sound: 1 2 3 4 5

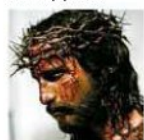
Extras: 1 2 3 4 5

Movie: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

The Passion of the Christ: Def Ed

Icon → Region B BD/R2 DVD
£11 Approx



Mel Gibson's harrowing account of the final hours of Christ's life definitely lives up to its

Definitive Edition tag. The BD contains the original 127-minute cut of the film (and the slightly sanitised 122-minute alternate edit via seamless branching) with high-quality AVC 2.40:1 1080p visuals and a robust DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio mix. Extras on the disc include three commentary tracks and a pop-up trivia track, while a separate DVD houses a superb 101-minute *Making of...* five historical featurettes, deleted scenes and much, much more. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

Dance of the Dead

Lionsgate → R2 DVD
£13 Approx



Ever since the *Dawn of the Dead* remake hit box office gold in 2004, there's been a never-ending horde

of zombie flicks vying for your cash. While the idea of mixing high school comedy with flesh-eating ghouls doesn't inspire too much confidence, this low-budget yuk-fest is better than most of the competition. This UK release only gets nine deleted/extended scenes as extras, but at least the anamorphic 1.85:1 transfer looks pleasingly vibrant and the DD5.1 is surprisingly expansive for such a cash-strapped production. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

Terror at the Opera

Arrow Films → R2 DVD
£16 Approx



The highlight of Arrow's recent trio of Dario Argento re-issues, this two-disc set is a

must-have for fans of the Italian horror auteur – featuring both the 102-minute international cut of the film and the 91-minute US Edit. Both anamorphic 2.35:1 transfers look great, making the most of the stylish cinematography, and the audio is fine. The former version gets DD5.1/2.0 English tracks and an Italian 2.0 mix, while the latter features a 2.0 presentation of the original 'Cannes Dub' soundtrack. Extras include a collectible booklet. **RH**

1 2 3 4 5

Doctor Who: Myths & Legends

Zentertain Ltd → R2 DVD
£50 Approx



This three-disc set brings together a trio of *Who* stories linked by their referencing of Greek mythology.

John Pertwee takes on The Master (again) in the rather duff *The Time Monster*, while Tom Baker has a try at 'Jason and the Argonauts in Space' with *Underworld* before facing alien Minotaurs in *The Horns of Nimon*. In addition to wonderfully restored picture and sound, there's also the usual plethora of extras including chat tracks, production docs and music demos, plus a look at *Doctor Who*'s long-running relationship with *Blue Peter*. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

30 Rock: Season Three

Universal Playback → R2 DVD
£25 Approx



It feels like an age since the last season of this award-winning sitcom hit DVD, but at last Tina

Fey, Alec Baldwin, Tracy Morgan and the rest of the *30 Rock* cast are back with another 22 unmissable episodes, poking fun at the TV industry. The anamorphic 1.78:1 transfers across this three-disc set are warm and detailed, while the 5.1 audio is rather flat – as you'd expect from a TV sitcom. An entertaining mix of extras includes seven episode commentaries, 13 deleted scenes, a table read, two featurettes and more. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

Nurse Jackie: Season One

Lionsgate → R2 DVD
£25 Approx



Former *Sopranos* star Edie Falco gets the role of a lifetime as the pill-popping titular character in

this wonderful hospital-based comedy drama, which takes the bitter humour of *House* and ramps it up to the max.

As well as being a great piece of TV, *Nurse Jackie* makes for a superb DVD release. The 12 episodes spread across this three-disc set benefit from extremely strong anamorphic 1.78:1 transfers and enveloping DD5.1 audio; healthy extras include four episode commentaries, featurettes and anecdotes from real nurses. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

The Railway Children: 40th Anniversary Ed

Optimum → Region B Blu-ray
£20 Approx



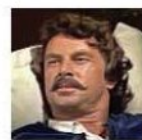
This is the first UK movie to be remastered for cinema, DVD and Blu-ray at the new

restoration facility opened this year at Shepperton Studios – the likes of *Kind Hearts and Coronets* and *Peeping Tom* are promised for later in the year. Its 1.66:1 AVC encode features a robust colour palette; it's the best I've ever seen the film look, although a relative lack of grain makes me wonder about DNR scrubbing. The LPCM 2.0 audio is true to the source. Extras include a 20-min retrospective documentary. **RH**

1 2 3 4 5

Prince Valiant

Eureka → All-region BD
£18 Approx



Following on from its impressive hi-def handling of the 1954 swashbuckler *The Black Shield of*

Falworth, Eureka Entertainment has served up another classic adventure from the same year on Blu-ray. Like its predecessor, *Prince Valiant* hasn't been released as part of the Masters of Cinema Series, and this time around it does show. The AVC 2.55:1 image looks solid for the most part, but colour reproduction can be inconsistent and there's some obvious print damage in evidence, while the DTS-HD MA 2.0 mix is tepid. The sole extra is the original theatrical trailer, in SD. **AvB**

1 2 3 4 5

Blood on the Bayou

HBO's vamp drama is back on Blu-ray

True Blood: The Complete Second Season

picks up at exactly where the last set left off, with telepathic waitress Sookie (Anna Paquin) and her friends discovering a dead body in a car. From there things just get weirder and weirder for the inhabitants of Bon Temps, taking the show to fantastic new heights: Sookie and vampire lover Bill sink deeper into national vampire affairs; Sookie's brother Jason gets caught up with the vamp-hating Fellowship of the Sun, and in Bon Temps itself something wicked is stirring...

Mark Craven: This second season of Alan Ball's Southern Gothic looks fabulous in hi-def. Once again opting for AVC 1.78:1 1080p encodes, the dozen episodes in this five-disc boxset retain the show's grim 'n' gritty aesthetic (even if it does feel a little more polished this time around) and pack the screen with fine textures, an immaculate colour palette and plenty of well-resolved grain. A closer look can show up the odd spot of artefacting in a handful darker scenes, but this is still another first-rate BD release from HBO.

Steve May: A bite above the usual episodic TV fare, *True Blood* doesn't play subtle with its audio mix. Presented in 5.1 DTS-HD MA, it fills every corner with suitably creepy atmosphere, including a peppering of sporadic shrieks and screams. Exterior shots have an omnipresent swampy buzz and the 360° aural FX for Sookie Stackhouse's mind-reading trickery remains fresh and fun.



They weren't enjoying their first rollercoaster ride



HCC VERDICT

True Blood: The Complete Second Season → HBO Video
All Region BD → £50 Approx

We say: Take a bite out of this sumptuous series on Blu-ray

Picture: 1 2 3 4 5

Sound: 1 2 3 4 5

Extras: 1 2 3 4 5

Movie: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

Typically for TV audio, the dynamics aren't particularly dramatic (no need for Night Mode here) but fidelity is high. And what's not to like about the bluesy Southern score used throughout?

Anton van Beek: It still doesn't deliver all the goodies you might hope for, but this latest batch of supplementary features is definitely an improvement on those that accompanied the debut season. The Enhanced Viewing Mode for each episode has had an upgrade, with the trivia and pro/anti-vampire updates being joined by 'Flashbacks' and 'Flashforwards' that link to related scenes from elsewhere in the series. Also, the PiP Character Perspective element of the EVM now features four of the cast providing in-character comments. Elsewhere, six episodes get audio commentaries, and there's a collection of educational vids from the Fellowship of the Sun and a 24-min fake TV news show.

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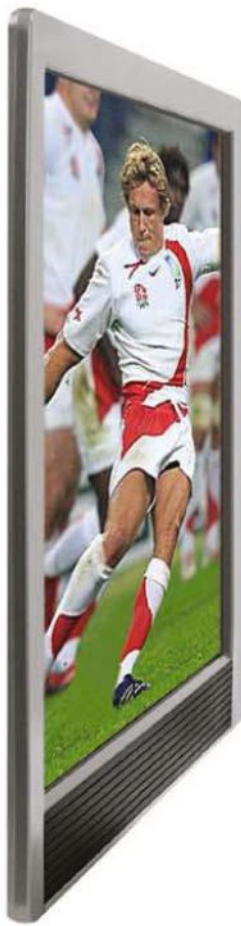
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Home Cinema

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How easy is it to buy a home cinema system that meets your expectations in terms of quality of picture and sound? You could read the magazine product reviews, find out who sells the recommendations, five-star favourites or best buys at the cheapest price and place your order. When the system is delivered to your door in the box, you get a friend who knows his onions to install it - and live happily ever after.

This is a fairly well-trodden path but it leads to dissatisfaction and a lot of wasted money. Besides there being a bewildering choice of components on the market today, there are also different ways in which components can be installed and connected together. Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, plasma or LCD, an HD ready set or one with full 1080p capability? And on the audio side do you plump for a 5.1 or 7.1 speaker system, passive or active sub, and where do you site them for the best results? The choice of home cinema amp raises even more questions. Will you be listening to music through the same system? If so, you need an amp that approaches the performance of a decent 2-channel hi-fi amp, which is not that easy to find. Do you need SACD, DVD-Audio, or Blu-ray capability? How many inputs do you need for video, s-video,

component, coaxial digital, optical digital and HDMI? The above are just a small percentage of the decisions that must be made. In short, it's complicated and very fertile ground for getting it wrong.

Achieving potential

To select a system, you could choose a collection of 'Best Buy' components in the hope that they will be a great combination. Maybe, but probably not. You could buy a pre-packaged all-in-one system from one manufacturer. This is almost certainly not the best route either as you will miss out on enormous potential. From informal surveys conducted, it appears highly likely that **the majority of home cinema systems selected and installed on a DIY basis (that is without professional input) are performing at way below their optimum level.** To compound matters, most are also ill-matched to the room in which they are installed and are, in reality, the wrong system. Without considerable knowledge or experience, high quality home cinema is not a suitable DIY activity.

Our aim must be to buy a home cinema system that will provide an excellent picture quality plus an audio delivery that will match,

or even better, the commercial cinema experience. It must be exciting, reliable and deliver true value for money.

What and Where to buy

To ensure a home cinema system is right for you, where do you start? Here's an important tip ... **don't** start with **WHAT**, start with **WHERE**. There's only one way to give yourself the best chance of getting it right first time, and that's through a specialist AV dealer. It's possible you have preconceived ideas that put you off visiting one. Although you would welcome the advice and guidance, you don't know the technical jargon. You don't want to be talked down to. Your friend has said they only sell expensive gear and they're not interested if you don't have a big budget. They're expensive. These are just myths.

Most specialist AV dealers are running their business because, above all, home cinema is their hobby. They spend a large portion of their time comparing systems to get the best possible results. They know the component combinations which don't gel together and, conversely, they know the combinations which give the best performance within a given price range. Very importantly, they know how to get a system working to its optimum. But they all also know the system must suit **you**.

“...the majority of home cinema systems selected and installed on a DIY basis (that is without professional input) are performing at way below their optimum level.”



Buying or being sold to?

There are dealers around, web based or otherwise, who will sell you anything you are willing to pay for. They may be a bit cheaper but that's all they offer. Now there's a group of long-established specialist dealers who are totally committed to putting the customer first. Their idea of 'selling' is to discuss your requirements, offer their advice, give you the best options, then play the systems for you and allow you to be the judge. You'll probably be surprised and, almost certainly, relieved to discover how easy it is to see and hear the differences between components and between systems. You'll be able to make a clear and informed decision about what to buy. The story doesn't end there. These shops won't abandon you once you've put your hand in your pocket. They won't leave you to set up the system you've selected as best you can. They'll install it in your home, make sure it performs to its best, and ensure you're entirely happy with the way it

works. Why? Because a high proportion of these dealers' custom comes through people who have bought from them before, either directly or by recommendation. It's vital to them to get it right for you.

Getting the best deal

Unless you've got money to burn, you'll be living with your new system for years. Most of these dealers offer much longer equipment guarantees than provided by the manufacturer, a very worthwhile benefit, but it also makes it in the dealer's interest to ensure high build quality and reliability. Maybe you could save a few pounds by buying piecemeal but you'll lose out on the overall package. As far as the dealers are concerned, they believe that taking care of their customers properly is a nicer way of doing business than just handing over boxes.



LISTED BELOW ARE 20 OF THE BEST AV SHOPS IN THE COUNTRY.

They have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards home cinema systems that will provide years of superlative performance and total satisfaction.

STAR QUALITIES

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Feedback

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HD Fox hunt

I was lucky enough to pick up a Humax HD-Fox T2 a couple of weeks ago. I bought it purely for BBC HD and ITV 1 HD as I can't get Sky HD (listed building dish issues) and wanted something other than Blu-ray from my PlayStation 3 as an HD source.

My signal strength is between 60-70% and the quality is between 85-90%. So far I have not seen any break-up in picture. I'm not sure if this box upscales SD channels, but the SD picture is better than the in-built tuner on my four-year-old Bravia. The HD channels are a noticeable step up, too, and I am generally pleased with the box. I have a nagging feeling that buying a box without a PVR was not the brightest thing to do but the early adopter in me makes me do stupid things



Humax's HD-Fox T2: single tuner only

(I know a firmware upgrade will allow external HDD recording at some point, but still only single tuner I think?).

Anyway, this questionable expense has only fuelled my desire to upgrade to a larger screen, in preparation for the World Cup in HD. My 26in Sony doesn't do the HD picture justice, unless I am sat right in

front of the screen. That is what lead me to buy your magazine for the first time. You have convinced me to give the Samsung LE-40B650 a go, perhaps saving me money in the long run, so all is not lost!

David, Epsom

The HD-Fox T2 is indeed a superb piece of kit. It does only

have the one tuner – a twin-tuner PVR version can be expected soon. But, as you point out, a PVR facility that works with an external USB HDD should be added via new firmware later in the year. The single tuner means that you won't be able to watch one channel while recording another – certainly if the



3D products are 'half-baked'

I read Barry Fox's article on the problems associated with 3D Blu-ray and lossless hi-res audio (*HCC* #181) with great interest. I've followed this issue recently with growing astonishment at the ludicrousness of companies such as Sony and Samsung, who are now making 3D Blu-ray players with an HDMI v1.4 output, optical, coaxial, and analogue outs, but can't be bothered to fit a dedicated HDMI v1.3 out for audio compatibility with the millions of v1.3 AVRs already out there. A case in point is the Samsung BD-C6900 3D BD player which has optical digital and analogue outs. Who are these connections meant for? Who is going to knowingly invest in a £300 3D Blu-ray player and £2,000 3D TV, yet pair it with an amp that doesn't accept HD audio over HDMI? Wouldn't it have made sense to ditch the superfluous audio jacks, and include a second audio-only HDMI, à la

Panasonic? I thought companies such as Samsung and Sony were desperate to drive uptake of 3D, not hold it back with half-baked products. The only company to have any sort of sense here is Panasonic. If (and it's a big if) I invest in 3D kit, I know which company I'll be buying from.

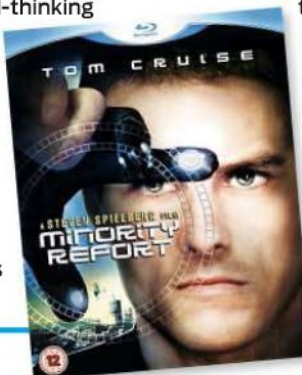
Amit Aggarwal, via email

Well, Amit, we agree with your view that Panasonic has been forward-thinking with the twin-HDMI output on its DMP-BDT300 Blu-ray deck, but must stick up for owners of non-HDMI amplifiers – they're not all Luddites. There'll be many home cinema enthusiasts who have upgraded the source and display elements of their systems to HD, but

haven't yet been able to afford a new AVR. Also, 3D players like Samsung's BD-C6900 pack 7.1-channel analogue outputs, providing another way to enjoy HD audio, but you have to use the deck's own DACs, which may be low-grade.

It may even be that with the launch of HDMI v1.4 receivers from the likes of Onkyo (see page 8), and Pioneer, that this issue becomes moot. Still, you've talked your way into a free (2D) Blu-ray.

Winner: Star Letter-writer Amit Aggarwal wins a copy of *Minority Report* on Blu-ray, courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment. It's available to buy May 17, priced £23 approx.



AWARDS 2010 HOME CINEMA CHOICE

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two channels are on different multiplexes.

Technology moves very quickly nowadays, and that's probably why you're getting better pictures from the tuner in your Humax box than your aging Bravia. And the Humax will upscale SD channels to whatever HD resolution (720p/1080i/1080p) you specify during setup. If/when you get the excellent Samsung screen, you might want to try setting the HD-Fox T2's output to 'original', which sends the unchanged signal up the HDMI cable. As a result, the TV does the deinterlacing and any upscaling that might be required. Stick with the option that gives you the best picture.

3D will fail!

I am a sucker for new technology, but the news about 3D Blu-ray titles being exclusive to different brands is putting me off getting into 3D. Content is king with any new format – just look at HD DVD – and my worry even before this announcement was getting hold of a decent selection of 3D films. Now, before we even decide if we buy into for 3D (which will be niche) we have an even more limited choice of films. Don't get me wrong, I'm not going to lose any sleep over the *Monsters vs Aliens*, as I didn't really rate it, and I'm quite chilled about the *Shrek* movies as after the first one they weren't all that good, but my main concern is that if I take the punt and go with a Panasonic TV and player will there actually be key titles like *Avatar* available to me in the first year? Internet buzz is that Samsung is bringing out a shedload of cash

for exclusivity – and James Cameron turned up at a recent press junket for them...

Nick C, via the website

Monsters vs Aliens and *Shrek* aren't exactly the type of films that'll get us queuing to buy a 3DTV from Samsung, either. *Avatar* might be, though, so we wouldn't be surprised to see Samsung or another brand snapping it up on an exclusive licence.

As for key titles available to buy in the first year, no strings attached, the only one confirmed so far is Sony Pictures' *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs*. Seeing how Sony could have been excused with bundling this title exclusively with its own hardware, the brand should be applauded for making it available for everyone.

Avatar. BD. Again.

I must admit to being a little disgusted at 20th Century Fox over the upcoming *Avatar* release. For them to say that they will release this title with no extras at all, to give the best picture and audio, is unacceptable. Haven't they heard of two- or three-disc sets? Fine, keep the first disc barebones, but Fox, come on, we aren't stupid! You want to wring as much money as possible out of this release so at least have the courage to admit it.

I for one won't be buying *Avatar* on its first release. Not that this will make any difference, as this title will sell shedloads. But no doubt when the 3D disc comes out this will also be barebones, with a future all-singing, all-dancing release

ready for Xmas 2011!

Paul Kelly, Plymouth

Avatar has so far made over \$2billion at the box office, and Fox probably thinks it can make heaps more by releasing numerous different versions of the film on different platforms. Annoying? Yes. Can anything be done about it? No.

Denon or Pioneer?

Hi there, I currently have a silver television and I am looking for silver DVD players. I have seen two manufactured in silver but HCC hasn't tested them. Still, I would just like your opinion – if you had to purchase either the Denon 1940 or Pioneer DV420S, which one would you go for? The few stores that I have called have all given me a different answer. I know that the Denon is about two to three years old and the Pioneer is more recent. I have been offered an ex-display Denon DVD-1940 for £100 and a brand-new Pioneer DV-420VS for £70 from Superfi. Hamzah, via email

Both these players should be capable of a strong AV performance, and both will upscale DVDs to 1080p over their HDMI outputs to your TV, if it's Full HD. Areas where the Denon DVD-1940 is superior are its ability to spin DVD-Audio and Super Audio CD hi-resolution music discs, and its multichannel audio outputs. However, both will, of course, serve up surround sound via their HDMI and digital audio jacks to your amplifier, if you have one. There are questions you should be asking about the older 'ex-demo' Denon, though, including how much use has it had, and what kind of warranty is offered. If all you want is a machine to play DVDs to a good standard, the Pioneer might be the safer option ●

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